The WHITE DAWN

By

Belle Hagen Winslow

FT MEADE
GenColl

Class PZ3

Book .W7207

Copyright No. Wh

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

THE WHITE DAWN

THE WHITE DAWN

Mrs BELLE (HAGEN) WINSLOW

MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.
AUGSBURG PUBLISHING HOUSE
1920

PZ 3
.W7207
Wh

Copyright, 1920, by
Augsburg Publishing House
Minneapolis, Minn.

©CLA605615

no. 1

EHB 2 Feb. 1921

To my Parents,

Thor A. Hagen and Ingeborg H. Hagen,

this book is dedicated.

They are, God bless them, still with us.

FEB -1 1921

20,1.

PREFACE

JUST as I am about to write a few words of greeting to commend to you this wonderful book, which takes us back to Norse Mythology, America awakes to the problems of reconstruction. These burning questions, which a world-peace brings, must take us back to the nations of the Old World.

The reader will herein find a new understanding in social and religious thought. There is need of Viking courage *now*, that we may make peace the most militant thing in all the world. There is need of sympathy, that we may understand each other in this new brotherhood of man. There is need of personal purity. There is need of a true religion, without which we, too, must sink in the slough of desolation.

There is need of a broader vision on the extended horizon of a new, dawning day.

(Signed)

HENRIETTA PAULSON HAAGENSEN, A. B.

Hillsboro, N. D., May 25, 1919.

CHAPTER I

THE flaring lights of many candles illuminated the festive board of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller. At its head he sits, large and florid, his hair thick and ruddy. Ruddy too is his wavy beard, rippling over his broad bosom, His features are large and strong, his eyes are steely blue, his deportment is dignified, almost haughty. Along both sides of the table sit friends and retainers. Near the "high-seat," occupied by the master, sit the relatives and close friends; below them, the retainers and servants, themselves the offspring of those who, in their time, served Thorold's progenitors.

The huge trenchers of bread and meat had been emptied and the honey-cakes were brought on. Now the mead flowed freely. Skaal after skaal they drank, to the pagan kings, to Odin, to Thor, to a dozen lesser deities. Then the sound of the harps drew the young people into the dance, while Thorold was left at the table with the older men, faithful friends to him thru many a bout.

"Sing us now songs of the old kings and our Norse gods!" he cried, nodding to a young skald who, idly leaning against the wall behind him, stood

tensely watching a young girl as she flitted past with her partner in the dance, "Sing, Oyvind, sing, for this purpose I brought you into my holdings!"

With a straightening, as if just roused from a dream, Oyvind took the harp and, with practiced fingers, awakened the sweet spirit of his loved instrument. His eyes flashed as he played. The young blood ran riot in his veins and stained his cheeks, for Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, sent him a look that more than made up for his enforced stay among the older men.

"It is true, my friends," continued the host in his mighty roar, turning to those around the table, "the White Christ must be worshiped in the church built for that purpose, now that Olaf has so ordained; but here in my hall, among my friends, here shall our old gods be held in reverence. Ye comfortable old gods, we drink to you!"

Oyvind the Skald was two and twenty, tall and slender, with a shock of yellow hair, which was inclined to curl. The beauty of his face, with its fresh coloring and delicately chiseled features, might well have been envied by a beautiful woman. His hands were small and well formed, his movements were as graceful as the panther's walk. In his large, purple eyes lay the soul of a dreamer. Many were the bright eyes that slyly sought his, many the girl-hearts that fluttered in sudden agitation in his presence.

But to Oyvind only one pair of eyes, only one

form had any meaning. Without Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, the happiest throng became but a sad gathering; the dreariest place that held her straightway became an earthly paradise, with singing birds and a wonder of grass and flowers.

Not only was Gunlaug the daughter of the richest man in Lesje, she was the handsomest woman in the valley. In many respects she was different from the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired maidens of her acquaintance. Thorold had been a far-going Viking in his day. From an expedition to the south he had brought with him one who, the saying went, was beautiful beyond the right of mortal woman. It was said her complexion was made of milk and blood, that her eyes were soft and black, like the blackest velvet from Frankland, but in their depths slumbered a fire that frightened all but Thorold.

Gunlaug had inherited her mother's beauty of face and form. Her eyes were a mixture of velvety black and steely blue, resulting in a soft grey brown that reflected her every emotion in their clear pools. Her hair was coal-black and her complexion would have presented a baffling challenge to any artist, ambitious of immortalizing his prowess in the reproduction of the damask and the waxy white, struggling for mastery in her perfectly featured countenance. As the daughter of Thorold she would have been a queen in any gathering, even without her beauty; as it was, no one nourished any jealousy nor attempted to dispute with her the place of supremacy.

She was so far out of their class that their personal feelings entered not in at all in their regard of her. Hal she been a queen, in reality she could not have been farther removed from them, tho she was present in every gathering and carried herself precisely as the other maidens the country had produced.

Gradually the old Vikings fell under the influence of the mead, and with more noise than music they threw themselves into the songs, stamping their feet, clinking their filled bowls, laughing, cursing, drinking. Oyvind knew at what moment he could escape. After a long, tense look into Gunlaug's eyes, as she came swinging towards him in the dance, he hung his harp on the wall and left the room.

With quick steps he walked into the wedge-shaped shadow of a giant pine, lying inky black across the scintillating surface of the new-fallen snow. It was Candlemas night. They had gathered early that morning, for there was much to do. First the remembrance cups of the Asa-gods were blessed, according to old forms. The young horses and cattle had been slain and the dishes had been sprinkled with their blood. The preceding summer had been cold and dry, resulting in a meagre crop of corn, and this was the day to bespeak the Asa-gods' aid for the following year. Accordingly, every ceremony was accompanied by prayers for a good season. They trembled, too, as they made their offerings. Evidently the old gods were angry that the people of Lesje had accepted Christianity. But now

it was all over, only the feasting and dancing were left.

Presently Gunlaug emerged at a side entrance. A faint sound, like a night-bird's call, led her to Oyvind. First he found her hands, then he drew her into his arms.

"I love you, Gunlaug!" he whispered, "you are the sweetest, the most beautiful being on earth! Just now, while I was compelled to sing for those old men and watch while you danced, first with one, then with another, I thought my heart would break. I had to see you! Thank you for coming! Thank you for listening! In my station of life I have no right to speak of my love, it would be meet that I should perish of loneliness rather than so speak to the daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller!"

Her hands went up around his neck and she pressed her burning cheek close to his face. "No! No!" she murmured. "Don't say that. I am glad you spoke. Glad you told me. Had you not, perhaps I should have perished in my despair. Did I think you loved another woman the spirit of my southern mother would perhaps rise up in me and I should do her harm! The fierce blood they say runs in me would not suffer a rival to live! But now, come what will, this happiness of knowing that you love me will never pass." Her voice trembled, and from her emotions she swayed in his arms like a reed in the wind.

"Is there any hope for me, Gunlaug?" he asked eagerly, "I shall do what you ask me to do. I shall no longer wander among the forest and mountains interpreting the wonderful music of nature. I shall hang my harp on the wall and go on Viking-raids. I will go to Gardarike, whither an expedition will soon be on the way. Many a poor man has found riches and renown in the land of the Russ."

"Don't lay up disappointment for yourself in such vain hopes," whispered the girl; "that would not appeal to my father. He wants me to marry a land-owner who can give me a good living and as many maidens in the servants' quarters as I now possess. You might return a Russ jarl, and it would not move him. Perhaps this very night he decides whom I shall wed."

She shivered, for she remembered Gunstein the Brave, who that moment sat drinking with her father. He had sent her such appraising glances while she moved about the dance. It had filled her with such a strange fear.

"But if I secure the riches by which I can buy for you the things your father desires his daughter to possess?" persisted Oyvind.

"My father would not let me wait, my skald," she whispered, "even now he may have chosen him whom I must wed."

Oyvind made no reply, only held her a little closer as in defiance of any one who might attempt to take her from him.

"There is only one thing we can do," she murmured; "as long as I am free I shall come to you, like this, till we are discovered. Tonight I am free, the gods know for how long!"

"You shall not be wed to any one against your wishes!" he declared fiercely, "I will not suffer it, Gunlaug! I shall find a way! I shall steal you! I may sell my soul to the Christians' Devil, but I'll never allow any one to take you from me lest you so wish!"

"Don't, Oyvind!" she protested, shuddering. "Don't mock at the Christians' Devil! The White Christ is a much greater God than the Æser, whom the men still worship, and I am afraid of the Christians' Devil! The good priests tell us he is worse than the Jøtuls and the Frost Giants, that he reigns over a region far worse than the one of Hel, goddess of the shades, and there is no escape from him after he has once reached his claws into you. I better pray to the White Christ and His Holy Mother that They forgive that dreadful speech. Perhaps the Virgin will help us, as Freya has been known to help unhappy lovers. And, listen! No longer do we hear the harps, Oyvind! You must let me go lest we be missed and suspicion aroused at once."

A few days after the feast a rider stopped in Thorold's tun. He bore a messenger-token from Olaf, calling Thorold the Strong to Nidaros.

Olaf was very angry when the old Viking came before him.

"What is it I hear of thee and the people of Lesje?" he asked sharply. "Didst not thou and all thy people accept the White Christ when my laws were read to your bønder, assembled in Thing, and did I not then make thee my lens-man? Now I have learned that, at Candlemas-tide, thou, with thy friends and people, hadst a feast, blessing the remembrance cups and making sacrificial offerings to the Æser? Is it so you do in Lesje?"

"We had no other feasts than our friendly drinking-parties," replied Thorold with dignity. "What may have been told you that should have fallen from our lips, how do I know? Lesje's people, mothers' men of good understanding, would take care not to use such language. But from using foolish and drunken talk I can not keep the people."

"But I understand that you have feasts round about where you offer to the Æser for peace and a good season," persisted Olaf.

"We have had Yule-feasts and Candlemas feasts round the district," returned Thorold diplomatically, "and our people do not prepare their feasts so sparingly that there is not something left over that can be consumed afterwards. It is hard, at times, to know who may partake. My holdings are large, with many houses. From far and near people come, and it is a joy to drink together, many in one company."

Olaf knew Thorold lied. When he bade him godspeed he said:

"I shall come to Lesje, Thorold, sooner or later, then I shall come to the truth of what you are telling me. So if you and your people have overstepped the bonds laid upon you by the White Christ and the Holy Church, do not try it again!"

Then Thorold went home. He sent messenger-tokens all about the valley, and when they met together he said to his men:

"I have come from Nidaros, where I went in answer to Olaf's command. He is enraged. He thinks, since he had made me his lens-man, I should have kept you to the new faith. He has an eye on Lesje, and we must have a care lest we be found guilty of disobeying his laws. That Olaf finds illy done, and it will mean that some of us will lose eye or limb, be taken into strange places as hostages, or laid in irons. From now on it behooves us well to be on the lookout against those who carry tales to Olaf."

CHAPTER II

WINTER gave way to spring—spring in the Northland, where the tender green of the birch against the sombre background of the pine and spruce forests makes a pleasing pattern which, in its restfulness, is never seen except in the North. Spring had returned with its myriad birds, among which the nightingale sang his wonderful love-notes, and with its balmy, transparent nights, during which the sun barely sets.

Gunlaug was always abroad then, and at that season of the year no one ever tried to keep her indoors. Often at peep of dawn she left her home to wander among the trees and the mountains all day, perhaps till far into the night. She loved the beauty of her wild surroundings, she reveled in the sweet scents of growing things, and she talked to the girds and animals. These had no fear of the silver-voiced maiden and she, in turn, knew not the need of fear. Perhaps there were dangerous animals and even more dangerous men, but she knew nothing of either. She enjoyed the free life of the woodland fawn as soon as the welcome visitor, spring, had reached into the deep valley, where, for generations, her forefathers had made their homes.

There was one place where she especially loved to linger. It was in a deep grotto, cut into the perpendicular wall of the mountain, rising high above its fellows, called Ditmorpiggen. It was a little hard of access, but by climbing upward, zigzag fashion, and high above the grotto, she could let herself down to a narrow ledge leading to the mouth of the cave. The floor of the cavern was covered with a deep layer of sand, the result of centuries' erosion, mingled with dry leaves, sent in by the wind. After entering, which was accomplished by getting down on one's knees, there was room for the tallest man to stand upright, and the floor covered, roughly speaking, about twelve feet square.

The place was to become still dearer to Gunlaug, for one day she met Oyvind near Ditmorpiggen. His face turned crimson at the sight of her. With a sudden spring he stood before her, arms outstretched.

"I was just wondering how it would seem to meet you in the woods!" he cried. "I can scarcely believe my own senses! Almost I fear I have encountered an elf-maiden who has taken your form to bewitch me! Who knows but she'll resume her natural appearance in my embrace?"

A sudden chill struck her heart. Then she shook it off and laughed shyly up at him. "Pray that you never come nearer to the elf-maidens than now, Oyvind," she said with whimsical solemnity. "From me they are ever far away."

In obedience to her request he climbed the mountain with her. Then carefully they glided downward to the ledge, which they followed till they stood before the grotto. Then they stooped and crept within.

"How wonderful! It must have been made for unfortunate lovers, without a portion, this light and airy little cavern, Gunlaug!" he cried as they sat together among the sand and leaves, her head against his breast.

"I, too, have thought so," she smiled back at him. "Could I let you know when I come here, this should be our trysting-place, Oyvind. We must think of some signal by which to let each other know we are present here."

"Would it be well for you?" asked Oyvind wistfully. "Might not your father discover that you meet the poor, unportioned skald here, in this lonely mountain cavern? Might it not bring you trouble, dearest?"

"Let trouble come!" she cried with eyes ablaze, "I dare risk anything for your love, your companionship! What lies in the future, this I know not, now I'm free! Even now my father may have chosen him whom I must wed. When I am a wife it'll be too late; till then I shall follow my own inclinations, unless you, Oyvind, are afraid."

"I?" he laughed. Then he grew serious. "Have you any preference?" he asked jealously, "is there any one you wish him to select for you?"

"Yes," she replied demurely, "there is one."

He sat up, stiff and forbidding; with a jerk he withdrew his arms from about her and folded them across his breast. "Of course, it would be too much if I should venture to ask his name?" he murmured, pale and trembling.

Gunlaug laughed a low, rippling, teasing laugh. "Of course you may ask, and don't you wish I'd tell?" she returned, looking up at him from the corners of her eyes.

A vivid flame burned in his eyes, a slow white wave crept around his mouth, but he was silent. At last Gunlaug felt pity for his suffering.

"Dearest," she whispered, "his name is Oyvind the Skald!"

He opened his arms to her and she crept back, with her head nestling against his side. She felt how his heart pounded as if it would break from its narrow prison. His face was no longer white, but the flame in his eyes continued, tho not the white flame of pain and disappointment. It was one equally deadly, and in it there lurked the greatest danger to the unwary lovers.

CHAPTER III

THE glorious spring days not only tended to feed the flame of love that burned in the hearts of Oyvind and Gunlaug, they also brought back to life the tiny spark lurking among the ashes of the past. Gunlaug's fear that night in February had not been unfounded. Gunstein the Brave, so called from his many Viking-raids, was rapidly throwing off the grief for his deceased spouse and had begun to look for someone to occupy the place of the dear defunct at his fire-side. For six years she had slumbered in the grave which was dug for her and which, since the advent of the White Christ, had been consecrated by the priest. There let her rest. His fifteen-year-old daughter needed a firmer hand than that of his aged aunt. The boys needed attention, too.

Above all he needed a closer companion than any he had now, and he wanted a maiden, young, strong, and comely. He had not far to go. He had kept an eye on Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller. She was the one woman worthy of him. He would ride out to her father's gaard and bid her fair.

The blood of kings flowed in Gunlaug's veins.

Thorold was the son of Gunhild, daughter of Earl Halfdan and Ingeborg, who was daughter of Harald Haarfagre, the first king to rule the whole of Norseland. Adding to this that Thorold was the king's lens-man and held more land in fief than any one else in Lesje, it is easy to see that Gunstein might well be proud to bid the maiden fair. In the matter of Viking-raids, none in Lesje could compete with Gunstein, none could boast so loudly as he nor so long. He had often sworn there was only one woman worthy to fill the big place at his side, Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold, the loveliest and most loved woman in all of Lesje.

Now that the time for going a-courting had arrived, he routed out his men. After they all had made themselves tidy, he set out with them, in state, as it behooves a man of his station, bent upon an important mission.

The old Viking presented a heroic figure as, astride his horse, he set out ahead of his dozen house-carls, towards the broad highway, leading to Thorold's holdings. He wore a round cap, fitting tightly, and hiding the bald pate that bespoke advancing age. His short coat was buttoned with a double row of silver buttons. His grey vadmel breeches were held about the knees by newly polished silver buckles. His legs were covered with spirally wound vadmel, ending in low cow-hide shoes, also resplendent with silver buckles.

Thorold's men met him at the gate and took the

horse. Gunstein jumped lightly to the ground and, with outstretched hand, walked towards Thorold, who was coming to meet him.

"Good day, Friend Thorold, and thanks for when last we met!" greeted Gunstein.

"Thanks to yourself," returned Thorold with a grip few men could have endured. "Call your men," he went on hospitably, "my knaves shall take their beasts while the wenches in the servant quarters will gladly see after such stalwart carls as yours. In the meantime you and I shall have a dish of mead and a honey-cake in my hall."

Side by side the two sturdy old men walked towards the guest-hall, a long structure across the tun from Gunlaug's buildings.

Trenchers with meat and bread, pewter plates heaped high with honey-cakes and beakers of mead were set before the master and his guest, while they talked of wind and weather. They talked of the last expedition to Gardarike, of Bishop Grimkel's harsh measures, of Thorold's visit to Nidaros. They seemed glad to lay their tongues to any subject except that next to their hearts. The etiquette of the occasion demanded that the real errand should come out, as an afterthought, when the seemingly important business had been dispatched.

At last Gunstein cleared his throat. "I came in a weighty errand," he began. "It is bearing in upon me, my friend Thorold, that I need some one to take the place of my dear, departed Ingegjerd. Whom

should I then bid fair but the most beautiful maiden of the North, Gunlaug, daughter of my old friend, Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller?"

Thorold in turn cleared his throat. Then he replied with proper dignity:

"And for this I thank you. Whom should I as lief see ride into my holdings and bid me fair for my daughter as Gunstein the Brave, than whom none is richer in worldly goods, than whom none is more respected in Lesje, than whom none has a stronger heart in his breast! Added to all this, you are the friend of my youth. My consent to your suit I shall give, and I can also promise that of the girl, for she has been reared in the fear of the White Christ and obedience to her father. Bide here, Gunstein, I will hence to bring the maiden. From her own lips you shall hear your answer."

"Remember, Thorold, there must be no pressure made to bear upon the maid," returned Gunstein with a touch of hauteur, "there are enough maidens in the Northland would gladly be bride to Gunstein the Brave. I was happy with my cherished Ingegjerd, for she loved me; I would my second wife would do likewise."

A light cloud sat for a moment on Thorold's forehead. "No need is there for pressure," he replied a little sharply, "my daughter, since Olaf forbade the old gods, has been brought up to obey her father and fear the Lord. I shall bring her to you. In her father's guest-hall you shall bid the maiden fair."

But Thorold returned with empty hands to the impatient suitor. Nowhere was Gunlaug to be found. Shortly after this Gunstein rode away with his carls, having exchanged with his friend mutual promises of felicity and faithfulness. Gunstein promised, too, that he would again ride into Thorold's gaard, then to receive the coveted bride.

CHAPTER IV

GUNLAUG had been the first one to see Gunstein as he rode in with his men. The gala costume he wore and the retinue of carls, accompanying him, made it easy to guess the nature of his errand. Like a flash it came to her, that appraising look from him, when she danced at the celebration of Candlemas. He had not been so far gone under the influence of the mead as the other men and she feared Gunstein had guessed her meeting with Oyvind that night.

It occurred to her, too, that Gunstein would not need to ask twice for her. It was to such a man her father would pledge her or not at all. In sudden panic she made her way into the woods, which quickly shut her out of sight from the home buildings.

Two young women, her cousin Gunhild and the maid Ylve, sat outside the women's hall and saw Gunstein's arrival and the reception he received at Thorold's hands. Gunhild sighed.

"I fear me that my father's brother will mate our young lady with the old Gunstein the Brave," she said. She was a year older than Gunlaug, but after Thorold's second wife, Thora, had died, the girl had

stayed and looked after her cousin as if she had been an older sister.

"And it fares but ill if he does," added Ylve, "it is but poor policy to mate young blood with such an old, heathen relic. Also, methinks she has found him her heart lists."

"Wist ye that!" cried Gunhild with a quick look about her. "Have you, too, a suspicion that she finds him in the forest? Have you, too, observed that her wanderings are more frequent, her stay more prolonged than ever before? She scarcely sleeps under roof. The forest and mountains have her by day and by night."

"Yes, I have observed it," replied Ylve. "She has no fear of the bear, of the wolf, nor of any other wild things that prowl in the forest and among the naked crags. Something there is to protect her. Methinks it is a lover."

"And still, can we blame the child?" cried Gunhild with trembling lips. "I may have been wrong not to watch her more closely, but how could I? For a few glorious weeks now she is free to roam, to love, where her heart chooses. Then Thorold will wed her to Gunstein or some other equally rich and equally far from pleasing our fair lady. After that her freedom is gone. Thereafter she will be as in a cage, and there will be no deliverance. These old codgers are hearty, you know, and bid fair to live long. Perhaps, however, I have done wrong in letting her come and go in that manner, according

to her own sweet desire. Sometimes I fear that a lifetime of agony may have to pay for this her brief period of happiness. I like not this visit from Gunstein the Brave. It bodes ill for our sweet maid."

Happily they were both unable to answer Thorold when he came and craved news of his daughter's whereabouts.

"Her way leads into the forest," said Gunhild, "and always she comes back unharmed. Such is her nature that she returns more sprightly, more lovely, each time she goes."

"Yes, yes," mumbled Thorold. Gunlaug was the pride of his heart, the joy of his existence, so like the adored Bianca, the mate of his youth. Bianca, child of the sun, who in the cold Northland had perished among the staid people of his kind. He had loved the beautiful woman, whom he had stolen from her sunny home, with an intensity peculiar to his nature. For this reason he had never been able to deny his child her desire to roam in the wilds. It had often worried him, too, this strange infatuation for the forest. In the Northland forest and mountain were endowed with a spirit conceived as a sinister force in the lives of individuals. But even tho Thorold had been lenient in this, it did not follow that he would yield to her entreaties in case she asked to be relieved of Gunstein. Gunhild wiped away the hot tears as she sat watching Thorold return to the guest-hall. In her mind Gunlaug was already as good as married to the old man.

In the meantime Gunlaug had dipped into the forest and was on her way to Ditmorpiggen. Over the thick carpet of pine-needles that silenced her tread she hurried towards her place of refuge, the grotto. Practically every day since she first met Oyvind near there they had met in the cavern, and many a happy hour had they spent in their cozy trysting-place. Oyvind was a wanderer, a dreamer, ever searching out the hidden melodies in the forest, glen, and mountain, and his aunt, his only relative, never knew where to find him. Not that it really mattered, however, for the wheels of the simple home machinery turned with equal precision whether Oyvind lounged in the shade by the wall, coaxing out the new melodies from the strings of his harp, or tramping into the farthest corner of the valley in his restless search.

This was the time of day when Oyvind usually came to the grotto. She hoped and prayed that he might be there. Would the stump be as he had left it the foregone day, or would it be turned to tell her he was waiting?

It lay as she had left it. He had not yet arrived at the trysting-place. Hastily turning the stump to show that she had passed, and would be in the grotto, she sped on. With frantic haste she climbed upwards, then she glided down till she stood on the ledge. The next moment she had crawled inside.

CHAPTER V

SHE had spent some little time in the grotto when rolling stones clattered down the mountain side, indicating that someone was coming. She crept out on the ledge and looked up. The smile died on her lip. It was not her lover that looked down at her. She saw above her the grinning countenance of Brynjulf, house-carl of Gunstein the Brave.

Brynjulf had spied upon her on Candlemas night and had threatened to expose her, and thereby, to her intense mortification, he had compelled her to dance with him. She shrank in horror from him, for he had been drinking deeply of the ale and mead, served in the drenge-quarter, and was now intoxicated. How she wished she had been more careful! She should have known that Brynjulf would watch her. She forgot the hold he would have, finding her now with Oyvind again, in thinking of the danger she read in Brynjulf's lurid looks.

There was no escape. She could not leave by the customary route, for he was blocking the way. She could not descend the perpendicular cliff in front. She could only wait! She braced herself against the rocky wall and stood tensely waiting. Perhaps a

well-aimed blow would send him reeling to the foot of the cliff?

He had barely touched the ledge with his toes when she hurled herself against him. But she had reckoned without the brutal strength of the man. He stood as firm as Ditmorpiggen itself, grinning down into her white face.

"Just wait, my pretty one!" he sneered, catching her by the wrists. "I think we have something to settle, you and I, and there is no time like the present."

The next moment she was struggling in his arms, his evil-smelling breath polluting her nostrils, as he attempted to lay his face down to hers.

"Never mind!" he said with a hateful leer, "I am not quite so pretty as your skald, but I am something more of a man. Besides, you can't have him, you know. It will fit beautifully for us that you must take Gunstein. If we work it carefully you may be my sweetheart. It will make up to you for having to be an old man's wife. If you are not satisfied with that, your secret goes to your father. I know more than I learned last second of February, too. This is not my first visit to your love-bower, and I have looked long for this opportunity of talking to you alone. I want to see if you are going to show any partiality, my pretty one, between me and Oyvind," he concluded with an insulting grin.

With an instant wrench she freed herself from his strangling arm, threw back her head and uttered a

piercing scream. Roughly he placed his big, hairy hand over her mouth, forced her to her knees and with one dexterous swing sent her into the grotto.

"Now," he said, as they stood tensely facing one another inside, "you see, there's nothing left for you but to give up to me. How can you explain your presence here with me now and the unearthly hours you have spent here with the skald? When I am thru with you, no one will wed you, not Gunstein, not even Oyvind! But even if he would, your father would see you in your grave before he'd give you to a portionless singer of songs. You know all this. But if you wed Gunstein, I shall keep still. I shall not ask much, a little softer bed than the other men, a little more mead, a little better food, a bigger measure of ale. As for the rest, I want to know why you are so haughty to me and I want you to kiss me. We might as well begin now."

Gunlaug shuddered. If she could only keep him talking! Their hour of tryst was approaching. Oyvind might be on the way.

"I—I haven't seen much of you!" she stammered, walking backward till she stood with her shoulders against the cliff, her hands stretched out on the bare rock at both sides. "You don't come here very often."

"I am here now," he grinned, coming closer to her, "and you can willingly give me what I asked for, as I can easily take the kiss I've humbled myself to beg."

She shrunk from him as from a reptile when he placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to pull her towards him.

"Don't be so rough! Stand back!" she panted, shoving with her hands against his breast in her desperate effort to relieve herself of his hated nearness. "Stand back, and I will do as you wish!"

With a rough laugh he stepped back, letting his arms fall to his sides. She came forward, slowly lifting her hands to his shoulders and placing them around his neck. When he stooped to receive the promised caress she caught with one hand at the coarse hair at the nape of his neck, with the other, a death-grip at his throat.

Thus taken unaware he gasped, reeled, tried to remove her hand, but she clung in frenzied desperation. With a cruel clutch at her shoulders he brought her to her knees. Her grip held and he, too, knelt with her in the sand. A desperate struggle ensued and she felt that, in spite of her tenacity, she was losing ground. Soon she would have to yield. She prayed to the White Christ, to the Virgin Mary, to Freya. Under these circumstances she had best include them all and play safe.

His face was growing purple and his breath came in gasps, flecking his lips with foam. He was desperate now. Lifting his clenched hand he was about to drop a stunning blow on her upturned face. Then the dim light of the cave became still further obscured and they both knew that Oyvind had arrived.

And so the blow never fell, for Oyvind caught the man's wrist with both his hands and gave it such a twist as to bring a howl of rage and pain from the bully's lips. After a short struggle Oyvind pulled the carl out on the ledge.

"Will you now be peaceable?" he asked in a white fury, "or shall I drop you over the cliff and save funeral expenses?"

Brynjulf bared his teeth in a vindictive grin.

"Little would it serve you to lay death-hand on the trusted carl of Gunstein the Brave," he sneered. "Who are you, anyway, that you presume to stand in the way of the richest man in Lesje? I shall go now, but for this day's work you shall pay, you and that hussy in there. My hand has the cunning to strike and also to find the vulnerable spot. You'll hear from me again."

With this, accompanied by foul curses, Brynjulf made his way from the grotto, and a few moments later they saw him at the foot of the cliff, making his way back to the forest.

"In the name of all the gods, how did this man come here?" cried Oyvind after they had reëntered the cave and she was nestling in his arms, sick and trembling from fear and exhaustion. "Brynjulf resides a half-day's journey from here. What errand can he have in these parts?"

"Oh, I am afraid to think!" moaned Gunlaug. "Gunstein the Brave rode into my father's tun this morning, in full gala costume, and accompanied by

his carls. He had feathers in his little round cap, silver buckles on his shoes. When I saw him I ran into the woods. Brynjulf must have seen me and followed."

A vivid red burned in Oyvind's cheeks, a flash of light leaped into his eyes, a white line etched itself around his mouth.

"A-courting has he come, Gunlaug?" he cried, "Gunstein has ridden out to bid you fair?"

She nodded. "I fear me you are right," she said, "the stump, did you see it? And my cry, did you hear it?"

"I saw the stump was turned," he told her. "Then I ran, for I knew I should find you. Then I heard your cry and was beside all my senses. I thought a wild beast had attacked you. And he was little better than a beast of prey, the one I found. But, this with Gunstein, think you Thorold gives you to him?"

"Yes," she replied, weeping. "Gunstein is precisely the man my father would choose for me. He is rich and influential, second only to my father here in Lesje, and my father's friend. Oh, the day I have so feared is upon us! Even tho I be not given in wedlock to Gunstein, that beast will speak to my father of what he knows and of our trysting-place. When he finds that I have a lover the doors and windows will be locked, a maid will guard me by day and sleep in my apartment at night. It was because father was devoid of all suspicion that I was allowed to come and go, according to my notion.

Only the gods know if, after all, it has not been my undoing."

Oyvind looked at her in fierce inquiry. "Your words, Gunlaug," he said, "they are strange, have they a hidden meaning?"

She gave him no answer, only hid her burning face in her hands and wept. Whatever the meaning of her mystic words, he was not to learn it now, so he changed the subject.

"Yonder lout, think you he'll tell tales, Gunlaug?" he asked.

She raised her tear-swollen face and looked at him. "Brynjulf stops at nothing," she told him. "He'd lie or commit any other sin. He spied upon us last Candlemas; he said he has seen us together here. Now we are at his mercy. Neither you nor I can guess what tale he may prepare for my father."

They sat for a few moments in gloomy silence, then Oyvind said:

"If what we fear is true, then we'll not be able to meet here again. We must think of some plan to meet elsewhere. Some signal to use. We must, if possible, frustrate Gunstein's plans. You are mine, Gunlaug, in word and deed. No other man has any right to call you wife. As long as I live you have no right to any other man. You see that, dearest, don't you?"

"Never shall I wish to be wife to another man, with you living or dead!" she sobbed. "But how

can I help myself, I have been brought up in the belief that I must obey my father. Besides, you can not take me, dearest. No priest would dare to join us in wedlock, for no bans could be pronounced. My father would stop that at the very first attempt. I have dreamt of going away with you, into a strange land, across the mountains to Svealand. But what would become of us there? You would be taken to thrall, at any rate you know what position I would be compelled to take. No, my Oyvind, there's nothing left for me but to marry Gunstein the Brave, or death!"

"And why not death?" he asked with flashing eyes. "Would you not prefer death with me to the disgrace of being another man's wife? You know that would be sacrilege, your marrying any man but me. Your father has no right to give a woman who, in the sight of the All-father and the White Christ, is my wife, to any other man. Why not end it all together?"

She shuddered. He had mentioned the White Christ. Who knew but He was the supreme God after all? If so, she knew the fate of a self-murderer. Life was so sweet, her young blood ran so joyously in her veins, the tide of their lives ran so high now in the early part of the beautiful summer. If only they could meet now and then!

"It will be impossible for us to meet," he said, almost as if he gave voice to her thoughts. "While you are free I shall seek you if the path should lead

to the Christians' Hell. Once you are wed, our meetings would make of you an unfaithful wife, than which earth holds no greater shame. I will not be party to that. It has an ugly name and a dire punishment among us Norsemen.

"So before you become a wife you have two alternatives, either you end everything with me, or else you give me up to the goddess Hel. When you are wed I have no longer any right to the breath I draw, for no intentions have I of fulfilling my duties of a man, that of establishing a home and shouldering my proper responsibilities in the world. My right to life expires on the day you are wed and not to me. It is my punishment for our sin."

"Don't, don't, Oyvind!" she sobbed, wiping the perspiration that had gathered in great drops on his forehead. "If our companionship has resulted in sin, lay the blame on me. The good fathers tell us that our first mother caused man to commit the first sin. Methinks woman has been a convenient creature upon whom to place the burden of man's transgressions ever since. Therefore lay ours upon me! Live! Seek another mate and be happy! I have known the full measure of earthborn happiness; if I pay dearly, so let it be! Don't let us dwell any longer with this sorry side of the question, let us rather make a plan by which we may meet, even after my father knows all.

"We shall never be able to meet here, I know that, but Gunhild will help me. If then I have a

means of letting you know where to come, we could see each other, dearest."

"What about the cliffs above Blackwater Tjern?" he asked. "They are just across the tun from your building and there are many crevices where we could hide from curious eyes. If only Gunhild will let you go."

"But how do I know when you are there, or how do you know when to find me there?" she asked in perplexity.

"We'll still use our stump," he replied. "When you are out for a walk, choose the path past it, then drop something into its hollow top. I shall visit the place every evening. When I find something there, anything, I shall take it as a sign that you are at the cliffs and go there. A night-bird's call shall lead you to me."

CHAPTER VI

SHE dreaded to meet her father. It was while she was mending the dress which had fared so badly at Brynjulf's hands that he entered her building. She read no undue sternness in his rugged face. Instead he seemed more tender than usual.

"My little girl is fond of ranging the forest?" he asked, stroking her black hair. "It is very hard on the dress, too. The weavers and sewing girls will have things to say if you are not more careful, child. How did it happen?" he asked, examining the ugly tear which she, with clumsy fingers, was trying to heal.

"It was on the mountain, father," she replied with scarlet cheeks and downcast eyes, "the juniper caught."

Thorold laughed in his big, good-hearted rumble. "You are a woman now," he said, pinching her round cheek, "and you must soon have done with all this running in the forest and climbing the mountains, like a rabbit. You must stay at home with your maids after this. You must learn to oversee the baking, the brewing, the spinning, the weaving, and the sewing. I am afraid I have been overindul-

gent, but never till this day did I realize that my little girl had grown into a woman. I think we must change our ways or it'll be but a middling wife that goes from Thorold's gaard to him who comes and bids him fair for his daughter. What think you of this, Gunlaug?"

"Let it be many days before you give me in marriage, my father!" implored the girl, clinging to him. "I am so young, so inexperienced! I want no one but my father. Is there no longer any room for your daughter in the buildings surrounding your tun, that you now speak of marriage?"

"There, there, child," he chided gently, as with clumsy fingers he tried to dry her tears. "A maiden should not weep at the thought of a bridegroom riding into her father's holdings. I am not in a hurry to give you in wedlock, but there is a season for giving in marriage as there is one for sowing, for reaping. Gunstein the Brave has this day sued for your hand. He is a good man, a wise man, and one well thought of in our country."

He stopped for some expression from her, but she said nothing. Only her deep, trembling sobs broke the stillness of the room. Then he went on:

"I gave him my word, but I did not set the day. That I reserved for you. Since you are so glad in staying with your father we can push the date back, say one year, say five. But within that time it must happen. You are twenty now, five and twenty is a good age for a woman to wed."

"Will he wait that long, my father?" she asked in wide-eyed surprise.

"Thorold is not the man to ask him," returned her father with dignity. "He will wait till you are ready, or I shall betrothe you to the first knave that rides into my tun and bids you fair."

"Oh, I am so glad, father!" cried Gunlaug, "you are so good and I am so glad I can stay with you!" Then Thorold, the lonely man, blessed her in his heart.

That night Oyvind stopped short, filled with amazement. He had walked to the stump, seeking a token from Gunlaug, when he saw it turned. According to its position she was in the grotto. Was it a hoax? Did some one play him a trick? Was she really there?

At full speed he started for Ditmorpiggen. His cuckoo call received the customary reply. She was in the grotto!

"How does it happen that I find you here?" he asked. "I have been from all sense today, roaming the woods like a wild animal. My poor aunt fears that I have fallen victim to the evil eye. Tell what has happened, dearest!"

In a few words she told him. "I shall make it five years," she concluded. "Gunstein will never wait that long, and then my father has said he'll give me to the first knave that bids me fair. You must come then, Oyvind! Then, if he will wait, well, five years are long. Gunstein is old, perhaps Freya will give

his fate into the hands of the Norn before then. Her shears are sharp. She can cut the span of a man's life in a short time."

"The White Christ and His Holy Mother have helped us!" cried Oyvind fervently, "I asked their aid. If good befalls us we must give them the glory."

"I, too, have prayed to them," admitted the girl, and to Freya as well. I never forget her. She helps unhappy lovers, Oyvind.'

"I, too," he confessed, "I laid my white goat on the sacrificial rock behind my house. Perhaps, after all, it is Freya who has the skeins of our lives in her hands. Perhaps we should continue to ask her that she entwine them into a new and wonderful web for us. Like you, I shall pray to her and the White Christ and His Virgin Mother. Perhaps they are members of the same family."

CHAPTER VII

A FEW days later Gunstein rode into Thorold's tun. He came now to complete the arrangements scarcely begun on his first visit. He was accompanied by only two of his carls that time, Brynjulf and Egil, who were well received in the drenge-quarters. They were well served, too, for in the eyes of the serving-maids they were both well-favored carls.

As before, Gunstein and Thorold exhausted every available topic of conversation before they touched the topic nearest to their hearts. Then the aged suitor cleared his throat:

"I take it for granted, friend Thorold, that you know my errand here today, and that you have kept your promise and have told Gunlaug the meaning of my coming."

"Just so," replied Thorold, "it is so that I have done. The lass is willing and will soon arrive to give you her word. She is but now at the task of dressing, naturally desiring to appear well in your eyes, this her great day."

Gunstein knew this was but empty phraseology of good usage, but it pleased him.

"Nay, now, that is quite unnecessary!" he cried,

"your daughter could be naught but fair were she clad in a leathern jerkin. But I am impatient to see the maiden. I wish to receive my wife and settle down at once to a quiet, domestic life, suited to my years. I want an early wedding."

Gunlaug entered, dressed in her best finery. Such was the rule among her kind. Only as a bride could she appear in costlier garments than on this day when she met her future husband to plight her troth. Scarcely less binding was this than the vow she would later, in the presence of her friends and kindred, pronounce before the priest. Though attired in her finest dress she was not a happy girl, this day, on the threshold of her bethrothal. Gunstein observed it.

"By the great Odin, girl, you are not overjoyed in having been chosen by Lesje's richest man!" he cried.

Gunlaug said nothing. She stood with folded hands, looking at him. Gunstein became uneasy and fell to walking the floor. Somehow the situation failed to appeal to him. He was better fitted to lead a Viking raid or fighting the Scots than to court a maiden with such flashing eyes, such disdainful curves of crimson lips. He wished it well over. He had been foolish in not letting well enough alone and accepting her from her father. He had wanted his answer from her own lips, and here it was, the situation.

Bah! She didn't help him, either, the haughty

wench. She just stood there proud and cold, as a queen. By Thor's hammer! Was this any kind of a mate for him, facing old age? But the die was cast. Gunstein the Brave was not the man to be daunted by any obstacle. It was really better, however, to have her that way; it was that kind of a woman he admired. He would be proud of a wife like that. But, anyway, why must she be so cold to him? How was he to get things started? His Ingegjerd, Freya bless her! had never been difficult like that. With a mighty clearing of his throat he tried again:

"Your father has told you, that is, hm, that I came to see him, hm, he has said to you, hm, hm, that is, that I came to seek you — in other words, hm, hm, I came today to bid you fair, hm, hm. Yes, that's it, hm, hm! For this I came today. To get my answer first-hand I came, hm, hm — tho that is not necessary, hm." Still no reply from Gunlaug and he continued, after a little more aimless drifting up and down the floor:

"I want to tell you, hm, hm; that is — I wish to say, hm, hm — I want to be married, that is, the wedding must occur soon. I have so little time, hm, hm, that I want you soon, hm, hm — I mean, I don't want to wait very long. And, yes, hm, hm, you haven't said, that is, you haven't, hm, hm, told me whether you want to be married to me or not."

"I have learned to obey my father," said Gunlaug, quietly.

"So, yes, so, yes," returned Gunstein, pausing in his peregrination, mopping his face and bald pate while giving her a long, appraising look. A man could take something from a perfect specimen of womankind like Gunlaug. He must get ahead with the business on hand:

"You are right," he said affably, "she must be like that, the maiden I wed." But there was no response from her. There it was, a deadlock again! What should he try next? He was almost afraid of her. Wished she were not so tall. Then a bright idea entered his addled pate:

"Perhaps we should sit," he cried, "let us sit on this bench. I can talk better when I sit, and you needn't stand." — She shook her head, "I can well stand," she assured him, "I am young."

He began wandering again, up and down the room. It was no kind of wife, this, to comfort him in the old age that was fast approaching. But she should change after the wedding. He would be master then. He'd show her! Another reason why he must have a speedy wedding!

"Come and sit," he mumbled, trying to take her hand. Then he fell back with greater fear than he ever felt in the long-boat. It was as if the point of an awl had projected itself from each of her eyes and bid fair to sting him. He groaned in his misery. Surely the wench could not be in league with the Christians' Devil! Surely she could not possess the evil eye!

But he would not give up. He was noted for his power of overcoming difficulties. He would not let this proud maid overpower him. He would let her stand to her heart's content, but he decided not to attempt much love-making. That were best left out till his star was in the ascendency. He could afford to wait. He chuckled within at the picture he conjured up to soothe his wounded pride. But how was he to get on? In despair he wiped the perspiration from his heated face, on his vadmel sleeve. Then he tried again:

"It was the wedding," he exploded. "I want the day set. I came to tell you that the wedding must be soon, on Midsummer Day."

On Midsummer Day! Only a little over two weeks, an unheard-of curtailment of time. There were three Sundays, to be sure, so there was a chance for the bans, but that was all. This gave her a sudden hope. Surely a man, so impatient to be married, would not wait five years. The vivid color flowed back into her cheeks, the happy smile of youth curled her lips.

Gunstein's eyes were open to the changes in her. Things were not so bad as he had thought. Here was a little chance for love-making, perhaps. He should not have made that mistake, however. She froze up worse than before. By Thor's hammer! He could not understand the present-day feminine antics anyway. His Ingegjerd had never been difficult like that. Still he liked her that way, he con-

cluded. It would protect him against the aggressions from the younger men. He would flatter her. That would turn the trick.

"You can't blame me for wanting the marriage at once, since I wed Lesje's comeliest maiden," he wheedled with what he intended should be a compelling smile, but only succeeded as a hideous smirk. He essayed a clumsy pat at the girl's cheek and then precipitately receded. It was uncanny, this lightning-like glint in the grey-brown eyes.

Then came her answer. "Midsummer, did you say? Yes, Midsummer five years hence! I have the privilege of placing the date any time within five years. I shall take the limit. On the last day of the next five years you may come again, Gunstein, then I shall be your bride of my own free will, but not a day sooner!"

Gunstein stood as if spell-bound. He did not believe his own ears. Had he, Gunstein the Brave, really lived to see this day? He who next to Thorold was the richest, the most influential man in Lesje? He'd see about it!

"Five years!" he roared, "are you out of your senses, girl? I won't wait that long!"

"I will," replied Gunlaug demurely. "I won't wed you one day sooner, either, which is more to the point!"

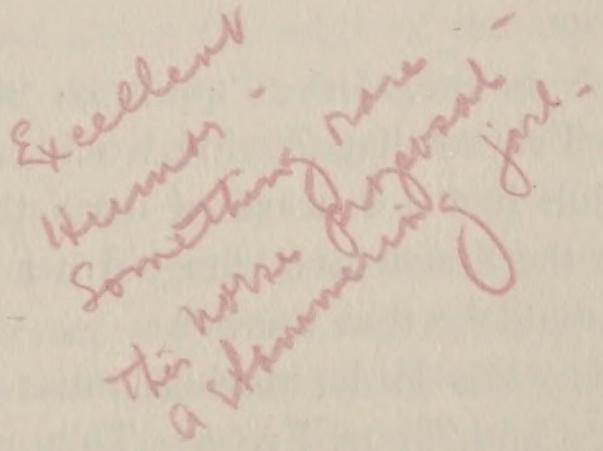
"Where is Thorold?" he bawled, "I have been tricked! I am an old man! Five years, forsooth! By Odin, I won't! If Thorold wants me to take

you he must give you to me when I say! I am not a lovesick youngling, ready for any compromise! I am a sensible man who knows that time is passing! I have been alone long enough! Now I want a companion for my declining years, and that soon! Do you hear, girl? I will not wait!"

"You better see my father," advised Gunlaug, with a curtsy as she left him. "He has given me five years, and he never breaks his word."

Outside, in the tun, she met her father.

"He is anxious to see you, he who desires to be your maag," she said. Then she ran to the back of the buildings and was soon hidden from view by the friendly fringe of young birches, skirting the forest.



CHAPTER VIII

SHE crossed the path, leading to Ditmorpiggen, cut thru the entanglement of bush and briar, over tumbling brooks that leaped joyfully over rocks and felled trees, with its still pools where the tiny fish darted about, beneath its foam-flecked surface. She was not bound for the grotto. Oyvind would not be there. On she ran, breathlessly, stumbling over the rocks and into unseen pits. She scratched her hands and face on the briars and tore her fine dress.

How she prayed as she ran! Pantingly, incessantly she prayed! Prayed that Oyvind would be at home! That Brynjulf had not heard of her father's offer to give her to the first knave who bid her fair. What if Brynjulf should be that knave!

The White Christ, His Holy Mother, must help her now. And, yes, Odin, Thor, Freya! They must all help her. Surely the combined effort of them all could do no greater thing than avert this dreadful catastrophe. She would throw herself into the tjern if that fearful thing should come to pass. The holy fathers threatened fearful things in such an event, but she would pray to the Holy Mother and Freya. They would understand, they would intercede.

If only Thora, her rosy-cheeked serving-maid, could keep Brynjulf interested so he wouldn't follow her. She groaned as she recalled the scene in the grotto and felt as tho Brynjulf were at her very heels. Merciful Heavens! It was enough to take her reason.

She had often, as a child, been at Oyvind's home. It was not very far; already the forest was less dense, and she began to see the light in the clearing. She stood for a moment, among the new growth of trees that skirted the open, looking towards the homestead before her, with its modest living-house and outbuildings lying around the small tun. They were sheltered from the sharp north winds by high mountains, towering above them nearly to the skies. She walked along the edge of the opening, keeping well within the leafy covering of small trees. She hoped to catch a sign, telling her that Oyvind was at home. She passed nearly half of the circle, then she broke off, at a tangent, and went towards the mountain.

Great, scattered rocks lay there till she, accustomed as she was to move in rough places, could scarcely proceed. She climbed a huge boulder from where she looked down on the tun where Oyvind's two carls were sharpening the scythes, preparatory to cutting grass in the clearing. The Northland is poor in produce, and there are many mouths to fill. Every part of it must be saved, including the tender twigs of the willow and birch, which were cut and tied in bundles. These were

dried and made fine fodder for the goats during the long winter. The men left for the clearing, farther down. Soon the aunt, too, left, followed by the maid, both with handscythes. They were prepared to cut the twigs of the new growth at the edge of the clearing.

If Oyvind was at home she would soon see him now. She was not mistaken, for after a few moments, harp under his arm, he emerged from the house and took the beaten path leading to the forest. Quickly she descended from her high perch and stole behind the boulder. Then she gave the penetrating whistle that she know would bring him to her. The next moment she was in his arms.

"What does this mean?" he asked eagerly, "something has happened!"

"I think you can have me, Oyvind," she panted. "I think Gunstein has refused to wait for me. If so, then you can ride and bid me fair. Father will then give me to the first knave that comes. You must be that knave, Oyvind."

He gave her a searching look. Was she sane? If so, miracles had surely come to pass!

"It is the truth!" she declared. "But let us rest, this run has stolen my breath."

They seated themselves in the crisp, green heather, its purply pink little bells modestly unfolding their exquisite beauty; but for once they were oblivious to the wonders of nature. They snuggled well into the crevice that held them from view, and she told her story. Then she concluded:

"You must make haste and arrive at my father's before Brynjulf hears of this and rides to bid him fair for me!"

"Think you he will give you to Brynjulf? A common lout! A house-carl!" cried Oyvind in horror.

"My father never breaks his word," she said.

A few moments later she hurried back over the delicate pattern of sunlight and shadow, spreading itself across her path. At the edge of the woods, behind the guest-hall, she seated herself under the friendly branches of a spreading bush. Here she sat, observing life within the tun. The dress she wore had belonged to Thorold's second wife, Thora, Thorstein Galge's daughter, who had worn it during the great moments of her life, and it had belonged to Thora's mother before her. It would perhaps be worn by Gunlaug's daughter after her. Now it was torn. Her hand was clumsy to mend, she must win Gunhild's attention. She would mend the dress, and what was more, she'd tell her something about Gunstein and Brynjulf.

CHAPTER IX

HER father came walking across the tun. He was bent and, for the first time, she observed that he looked old. He began walking forward and backward along the top of the cliff, above the tjern, his head bowed on his breast, his hands folded behind him, and his steps slow and unsteady. Something had happened.

For a long time he walked, endlessly, up and down the level edge of the bluff, which fell in fantastic irregularity down to the sandy beach of the tjern. Blackwater Tjern was well named. Towering mountains surrounded it, except where, at one point on its eastern edge, lay a gap, as if, from the edge of a gigantic bowl, a piece had been broken. This gave the only access to the tjern except by climbing down the bristling crags. The sun was far in the heavens before it found its sullen waters and yet far from the western horizon when its last rays touched its surface. At night it lay there still and sullen, without a ripple, while the twinkling stars and the regal moon, sailing across the velvety sky of the northern heaven, mirrored themselves in its placid waters.

A haunting legend threw a phantastic light on the

formation of the tjern. Gunlaug recalled it as she sat watching for Gunhild. Once it had been a beautiful meadow, the holdings of a man who held it in fief from his king, whom he had served well. As the successive generations passed, the owners, one after the other, added to its buildings, and at last a wonderful castle stood there. It had magnificent domes and steeples, great, outflanking wings, and a vast central building. Around it stood scores of lesser buildings for the retainers and servants, till the place could have housed not only all the king's men, but their families as well.

The last owner had been a handsome black-haired, brown-eyed young man, big and strong. It was whispered that he was a natural brother of the king himself. His lady was small and very darkly complexioned. It was said he stole her from her father, in the land of the Franks, and from the man to whom she had plighted her troth. Men and women were constantly coming and going along the wide high-road that led thru the gap in the eastern rim to the meadow, but no one knew whence they came nor whither they went. Some thought they belonged to the court of the king himself.

Great revelry was the order of the day. The sounds of their songs and their harps, their loud laughter and their ribald talk were carried to the tops of the cliffs where the bonde-folk, in a spirit of awe and dread, were wont to gather and listen.

But in spite of the noise, the feasting, the dan-

cing, and the beautiful music, there was no happiness in the lives of the owner and his lady. With the possession of all his wealth he had become indolent. He was cowardly, too, and no longer had any taste for heroic deeds. The woman he had torn from the arms of those she loved, hated and despised him. This brought him such incessant grief that, to drown it, he dipped ever deeper into the horn and into all corrupting practices which destroy body and soul.

One day the lover arrived at the castle. A henchman immediately took the news to the owner. They were careful not to reveal their knowledge of his identity. So the stranger, disguised as a troubadour, was one night caught alone in the presence of his lady. The two people asserted their innocence of all wrong. To no purpose. The cruel master had planned their punishment in a manner worthy of him.

Down in the lower dungeons they were immured, each in a tiny cell, with a small opening where they could face one another. Here they were left to witness each other's slow death from thirst and horror. But the punishment of the others was swift and sure. Scarcely had the last moan of the unhappy creatures ceased before the meadow, with all that was upon it, sank beneath the sullen waters, which then became known as Blackwater Tjern.

According to the legend the tjern would one day return to its pristine aspect. That day would come when the lovers were suitably revenged. The land should then be handed over to a pair of unhappy

lovers, and their subsequent happiness should remove from the place the last vestige of damnation.

It was strange that this old story, which she had heard so many times, should recur to her now. Perhaps because she sat watching her father walking along the edge of those cliffs. Suddenly he stopped and shaded his eyes against the level rays of the sun. Gunlaug shrunk a little closer under the overhanging boughs. It was Oyvind that her father saw, riding into the tun, followed by his two house-carls. In spite of his small following and the scrawny horse he bestrode she felt a thrill of pride in him.

He was dressed in gala-costume. Like Gunstein he wore short vadmel breeches, fastened at the knees with silver buckles, grey leg-coverings, a short, round coat and a small hat with a feather. But here all similarity ceased. As Gunstein had represented ponderous, old age, so Oyvind represented agile, winsome youth. Even Thorold's features relaxed as he stood there looking while the young man sprang from his horse and came towards him.

Gunlaug saw her father meet the young man and take the hand he proffered. They were so far away she could not read the expression of their faces, but a low murmur of their voices reached her. She sat breathlessly looking at the two men. Her fate was in the balance. What would her father say? A short time ago, when she had spoken to Oyvind, it seemed such a simple thing, this, that he should ride out and bid her fair — and now! Now it seemed

the very essence of madness. How she wanted to pray! But to whom? If only something would happen to show her whence came her aid!

Should she implore the aid of the White Christ, of Freya? Perhaps all the gods were in league to do good. That was reasonable. She would hold herself near to the White Christ, and to Freya as well, for a little longer. Then she would see.

The two men talked for a while, then Thorold turned away as if he were unwilling to listen. Oyvind held out a detaining hand, talking rapidly, his voice carrying across the tun, in a subdued roar. How she wished she could hear the words! Thorold stood for a moment with open mouth and staring eyes as if he failed to believe his own senses. Then with a jerk he pulled himself together, turned to the tjern that lay beneath the cliff, upon which they stood, and talked rapidly to Oyvind while he made a comprehensive gesture, indicating all the surface of the tjern.

Gunlaug could not hear his words, but the mighty roar of his voice betokened great perturbation of spirit. Then he dropped his arms to his sides, looked for a moment fixedly at the young man who, erect, and proud, returned the look. Then Thorold walked back across the tun towards the hall.

CHAPTER X

GUNLAUG wept in her agony. Gunstein had decided to wait, then, and all was lost. Again her hope came flooding back. Five years is a long time, much might happen in that number of years. Gunstein might die. He was so old. Then her father would be sure to give her to Oyvind. She must arrange that. Now that the perennial bloom of hope again lived in her heart it was with some of her customary jauntiness that Gunlaug rose from her recumbent position, under the bush, and walked across the tun to her building.

She sat in her little chamber till dusk. Then again all her worries assailed her. She asked herself a thousand questions which, as usual, remained unanswered. If only Gunhild would come! Perhaps she knew what had become of Gunstein, what disclosures Brynjulf had made, and what her father had said to Oyvind. She sat there trembling. She did not dare to face her father till she knew what he had heard about her, what they all had heard about her.

At last Gunhild entered. Gunlaug at once knew something was amiss.

"I am glad you are back, child," the girl said

kindly. "Long and anxiously have we looked for you. Your father desires to have a talk with you."

"Tell me first, Gunhild, what has happened here, what my father has heard about me," she begged piteously, "I dare not face him till I know."

Gunhild had decided not to tell her what had come to her knowledge, but Gunlaug's attitude was so pitiful, her voice so entreating that she was unable to withstand the pleading. She knew the entire story, having pieced it together from fragments told her by Thora and Ylve. The conversation between Thorold and Oyvind she had heard from her position in the drenge-quarters.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Thorold, in obedience to his daughter's request, went to see Gunstein, he found him furiously tearing up and down the guest-hall.

"What is this your wench tells me?" he began angrily, mopping his heated face. "Shall I wait five years for her? You are making game of me, Thorold, called the Strong! Have a care then, it is not I, Gunstein the Brave, who is ready to stand this kind of treatment from you or any other man!"

"It beseems you ill to use such language in another man's guest-hall," returned Thorold haughtily. "My daughter I promised you, but it lies with the bride to name the day for the celebrating of the nuptials. Five years she desires, and five she shall have. I have given my word. But, understand, this is true. If she desires to follow you to the altar as soon as the bans can be published, I shall not say her nay."

And it remained at that, for Thorold was a man of his word.

Gunstein left the hall, blustering and swearing by all the heathen gods, with a few more modern terms of cursing thrown in. His men had been royally entertained by the maids and were sorry to leave.

Brynjulf chuckled when he saw Gunstein's flashing eyes and corrugated forehead. The courting had gone askew! Evidently Gunlaug had been difficult. Here was a good chance for him to bring out his story. As long as the love-business went smoothly he had not dared to approach his master with the tale lest the old Viking, in full berserker rage, should cleave his head. Now he would likely hear him thru. Now he could tell his story. He approached Gunstein and respectfully doffed his cap:

"There is aught on my mind that you should know, master, but I have been a coward. Now I crave leave to speak. You may take my head, but it is for your benefit that I tell — —"

"Speak, knave!" thundered Gunstein. "But if I find the tale of too little worth for my time, by the hammer, I shall strip every inch of hide from your back!"

Brynjulf turned pale, but said quietly:

"You, master, shall be the judge of that. But be pleased to come away out of earshot from Egil. Very gladly would he hear what I have to say."

They were standing near the brewery, out of earshot of Egil, but not from that of Gunhild, when Brynjulf told his tale.

"It is regarding Gunlaug — —" he began.

"What, you knave! You oaf!" thundered Gunstein with flaming eyes, hand on the sheath-knife at his hip.

"I shall be brief," mumbled Brynjulf, shrinking from the mad fury in his master's eyes. "It happened

on the first day you rode over to bid the maiden fair. She ran into the woods when she saw you coming, and I, with a strong desire to serve my master well, followed. I found her in a cave that is hollowed out in the side of Ditmorpiggen. There she was in the arms of a lover."

"Speak you the truth?" shouted the other. "If not, look to your hide, for by Odin, I shall have you flayed alive!"

"I speak the truth, master," asserted Brynjulf, livid with fright. Then he told how he had followed Gunlaug to the grotto, that he had tried to take her out of her lover's arms and had been beaten for his trouble.

"Why did you not tell me this story sooner, you oaf?" snarled Gunstein.

Brynjulf hung his head. "I thought, if she bore herself as a good and chaste maiden should, it were better such be forgotten," replied he humbly, "but now that I understand she has annoyed you I feel it is time for me to speak."

"So, yes, so, yes!" mumbled Gunstein. Then he turned on his heel and walked back to where Thorold sat in the guest-hall.

"Good word, friend Thorold!" he said, holding out his hand.

"Good word again," returned Thorold, in surprise, taking the proffered hand.

"I now have the key to the situation with your daughter," Gunstein went on, sinking down on the

bench beside Thorold. "It is not because she wants to stay with you that your lass has stipulated for time. She has a lover. On the very day I came to bid the maiden fair, one of my knaves followed her to the cave in the side of Ditmorpiggen. There he caught her in his embrace. With main force he took her away, tho he suffered various bruises and torn garments. He says he will take us, any time, to their lair."

Thorold's face grew stern and pale. For not a second did he doubt the tale. Fool that he had been! He should have thought about this sooner! He remembered Gunlaug's torn dress, the scarlet cheeks and downcast eyes. He saw, for the first time, the meaning of her prolonged visits into the forest.

"Nay, Gunstein," he said after a pause, "never shall it be said of us Northmen, who should be an ornament to our land, that we disbelieve one another's word. No proof is necessary. I see it all now. It is as if a cover had dropped from my eyes.

"When I gave my word that she could have five years at home I did not understand that she wanted to gallivant with a lover. I thought she desired to stay with her aged father, and my heart melted in my breast. But now, should you still desire to wed my daughter, that promise does no longer stand in your way, and you shall have her in three weeks. If you no longer desire to become her husband, then let me know, and I shall give her to the first knave that bids her fair."

Gunstein stood for a moment in silence. Then he held out his hand. "My word is as good as yours," he said. "I still find myself drawn to the maiden. Now I must go back to my gaard and my men, the lazy oafs, who will dally the entire day thru, without supervision. Speak you to Gunlaug and tell her of the new arrangement. Soon I shall ride in here again."

It was after Gunstein with his men had ridden away that Thorold began walking on the cliffs above Blackwater Tjern. His heart lay heavy within him. Something that for years had warmed his desolate old heart had stiffened up and died. For the first time in his life he felt old and useless.

His only daughter, but now a babe, whom he had held but little lower than the saints, spending hours in a lonely mountain-cave with a lover! She, who he had held as sincere as she was beautiful, had lied to him! She had put her father, the staunch old man of honor, in a false position! Somehow he felt she had broken his heart.

He had not asked of Gunstein who the man might be, did not even know that Gunstein could tell him. He did not care. At least he was not a man of honor, or else he would have come riding into her father's tun and, as a man, bid him fair for her hand. A bondman had stolen her from him, a thrall! He groaned as he thought of the situation. They were so handsome many of these fellows, brought from distant corners, and they often demoralized the most

virtuous of women. Ah, yes, women who were well guarded at that! And he? What protection had he thrown around his innocent child? Absolutely none!

In all the length and breadth of the land there was no woman so entirely left to her own devices as Gunlaug. He groaned as from keen, physical pain, while he walked up and down along the level top of the cliffs, his hands tightly clasped on his back, his chin resting on his breast.

It was then that Oyvind, with his two carls, came riding into the tun. With cheeks as red as those of a blushing maiden Oyvind came up to where Thorold stood anl looked at him. With outstretched hand he said:

"Good day, Thorold the Strong, and thanks for when last we met."

Thorold returned the greeting. This, then, was the lover! He was not a bondman, not a thrall. A free-born free-carl, one who was in position to marry his daughter. Not that his worldly possessions would warrant him giving her to the skald, but, by all the ancient gods, what a pair they'd make! Being a skald lifted him up to a position of eligibility without property, too.

He could almost have found it in his heart to give him the maid. He no longer blamed Gunlaug for her choice. She had used her freedom well. But she was promised to Gunstein, and their deception had dealt him a wound that rankled deep. Thorold stiffened up into his customary, haughty attitude.

It required no second sight on the part of Oyvind to see that he was an unwelcome suitor. Every law of hospitality was broken, and Thorold, after the first words of greeting had passed, was openly hostile. But even with everything spelling defeat, Oyvind had an opportunity for which he had often sighed in vain. As a man he would bid her father fair for Gunlaug's hand, tho he knew full well that his high-flown dreams would never come true.

"Give me fair word, Thorold," he said, "I came to you as man to man. I love your daughter and I came to bid you fair for her hand. I am poor in all that goes to make earthly wealth, but give me hope and I shall hang my harp on the wall and hence in Viking-raid, or to the land of the Scots. I will join the men who, but now, are off to Holmgard. Give me your wish and tell me to be worthy of being your maag, the husband of Gunlaug."

While his words were humble there was no humility in Oyvind's attitude. His eyes were aflame, his head was held high. He might have been a king's son as he stood there, proudly erect. Even Thorold, angry as he was, vowed in his heart that any man might have been proud to own him as a son or as a maag.

But he had provoked Thorold's anger. This pauper was the cause of his recent sorrow. Poor as he was, he had ridden into his tun, with his two puny carls, to bid him, the richest man in Lesje, fair for his only daughter. Such audacity had never been

heard in the valley, perhaps not in the whole land! It was then that Thorold pointed to the tjern:

"There, my young buck, lies your patrimony! Wait till you have such holdings as is meet for one who aspires to become the maag to Thorold. Wait till Blackwater Tjern returns to its pristine condition. If this happens before the end of three weeks I shall give you my daughter to wife; if not, then she weds Gunstein. Such is my promise, and Thorold, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller, does not break his word."

After Gunhild had finished the story they sat for a long while without words, Gunlaug's sobs from time to time breaking the silence that lay around them.

"There is no hope," she whispered at last. "Nothing now but obedience to my father's command, which means that I wed Gunstein. And, Gunhild, you who have been both sister and mother to me, you know my heart is breaking. Give me a chance to see Oyvind occasionally, I conjure you by all you hold sacred! I must see him or, I fear me, I die!"

Gunhild, frightened by the heartbreak in the girl's voice, promised to do her best.

CHAPTER XII

BROKEN and trembling, Gunlaug changed her fine dress for a brown one, made of wool. She dreaded to meet her father, now that he knew her secret, and it was with trembling limbs she dragged herself to the guest-hall. Here she found him, cold as the wintry blasts from the Arctic, hard as Dovrefjeld.

"I have heard of your disgrace," he began, every word like stinging particles of ice driven with the stormwind. "Since you are not to be trusted I shall give you to a man who will look after you. You lied to me as a means of gaining time before your wedding. Now I consider that promise broken, not by me, but by you. Gunstein is still willing to take you, and the day for the nuptials is set at three weeks from tomorrow. See to it that everything is properly done, so that I may give my daughter in marriage as it behooves a man in my station. On that day I wish to be proud of you. Today, we'll not mention."

His voice broke. It seemed that the iron heart of the old Viking was breaking. The eyes which had not known tears since she had died, his second wife, Thora, Thorstein Galge's daughter, sixteen

years before, now these eyes were about to drown in weeping.

A week had passed. Preparations for the wedding were well under way. Several women had been added to the servant staff, and the work went merrily on — sewing, brewing, baking, and cleaning. For a week the festivities would continue, and it behooved Thorold to be prepared with food and drink in abundance. He must live up to the traditions of his race.

There would be guests from far and near. From the length and breadth of Lesje, even from Vaage and Lom. These places were far away, beyond the mountains, but Thorold was a man known over the entire Northland. He who was a son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller must make the occasion worthy of his fathers.

In the brewery three women were engaged in setting the mead. At the head of this enterprise was Alfhild, daughter of Oystein Skule. None in Lesje was as capable as she. In all Lesje, some said in all Northland. none could compete with her when it came to setting a butt of mead or brewing one of ale. None could compete with her in baking the crisp flat-bread that always served such an important purpose in feeding a multitude, nor in making the sweet honey-cakes that went so well with the mead and the ale. It was always she who was called to help prepare the feast for the wedding or the funeral or the christening, alike, or when the good people met, ostensibly to celebrate the day of some saint,

but in reality to propitiate the old gods for their enforced worship of Olaf's White Christ. She lacked her customary sprightliness that day, but she eagerly listened to every scrap of gossip that passed between the maids.

"Gunstein is fitting up his old guest-hall, making it fine like new," said Thora, who from her superior acquaintance with Brynjulf could speak with authority. "And he is rebuilding the women's building, making it fairly shine. The wonderful tapestries, the shawls, the silk, the gold ornaments, all are to be given to Gunlaug. And the silver plate and all the things Gunstein brought home from his Viking-raids are to be given her. She'll live like a queen!"

"Yes," returned the other maid, with a side-glance at Alfhild, "and a wench barely twenty. Methinks Gunstein the Brave could have made a better choice. She can neither spin nor weave nor sew. She has none of the accomplishments valued in a housewife. But that is not all; by day and by night she roams thru the forest, and those who understand such things will tell you that the forest-spirit has taken possession of her soul."

The two girls shook their heads and looked solemn. Being bewitched by the forest-spirit came next to being mountain-taken. Everybody crossed themselves and prayed to the White Christ when such things were mentioned. The new God seemed proper to address then, no one knew why.

Alfhild sighed. Just a little past fifty, she still

looked youthful. Her hair, a dark auburn and softly abundant, was only a little touched with grey. Her complexion was fresh, her eyes bright and, tho she was of ample proportions, her step was light. Still Alfhild was good to look upon.

When Gunstein's cherished Ingegjerd died he had been broken-hearted and then he had spent much time at the gaard of Oystein Skule, where he found comfort in the kind ministrations of his daughter. The neighbors had already begun to tell each other that a pair would be made of Gunstein and Alfhild, when he suddenly discontinued his visits.

At first Alfhild was disconsolate, but she observed that his heart had not been captured elsewhere, and her grief gradually subsided. Then when she sat in the church and heard the bans pronounced for Gunstein and Gunlaug the old sting returned. She walked home and shed scalding tears in the face of her own loneliness.

Alfhild was not the only one to grieve that day. Oyvind, too, heard the bans. He was seated in his accustomed seat on the men's side, when Father Anselmo read, for the first time, the bans announcing the marriage of Gunstein the Brave and Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller. He listened to the demand that those who knew any reason why the two should not wed must now speak, or forever hold their peace, and he felt like a coward! His limbs trembled and his face had the hue of death.

Had he done according to the promptings of his conscience he would have risen to his feet and declared that Thorold was giving in marriage a woman who, according to the God of Righteousness, belonged to another man. That this marriage would be a sacrilege. He sat saying nothing, stolidly listening in silence as those who knew not what he was in position to say, and he felt that, in the end, it would be his bane.

All that afternoon, till far into the night, he wandered in the woods, aimlessly, fruitlessly. Anger and a sort of uncanny fear stormed within him for mastery. He must see Gunlaug. He must see her and talk things over with her, or he feared his guilty conscience would kill him.

Like a pale wraith of her former self Gunlaug walked among her women, whose hearts were heavy for her. It was not difficult to see that her sun of happiness had set. The sparkle of her eyes was gone, and in its stead smouldered a flame of grief and fear unnamable. Her merry song and bubbling laughter were of the past. Gunhild, who watched her by day and slept in her apartment by night, knew well that scarcely enough food passed her lips to keep her alive and that, at night, sleep forsook her couch.

And Gunlaug never wept, never complained. She never voiced the despair that consumed her, the despair that was terribly written in her face. Where would it end? In suicide? In insanity? Gunhild

crossed herself and prayed to all the gods, old and new, with a sprinkling from the priest's calendar.

If she only dared ask Gunlaug what it was, this dreadful thing that sapped her very life. Something whispered to her that all was not well with the girl. She had done her an everlasting injury, she felt it. Why had she not thrown around her a protecting influence? Why had she allowed her to roam the forests, woods, and mountains, all alone?

Gunlaug had always been so highstrung, so impulsive. She had always been indulged, always followed her own inclinations. She had never learned to question her rights of giving way to her whims, never learned to discipline herself. Gunhild groaned in bitter self-denunciation as she dwelt on her own thoughtlessness. Criminal negligence of a motherless child, was the verdict she brought against herself.

Gunlaug did not analyze the trouble that had fallen upon her. She just lived under it as best she could. She dreaded the night, for then she was unable to sleep, and the thought of her youth and freedom that were passing benumbed her with its bitterness. And the shameful use she had made of her beautiful youth! She saw it all in its true light now that it was too late. If she could only see Oyvind! Perhaps he could comfort her.

One night, about midnight, she heard the sound of a cuckoo, first faintly as if the bird was far away, then nearer. It was Oyvind, who must have become

tired of vainly waiting for his signal in the stump. But how was she to go to him? She shuddered as she thought of Gunhild's bad hour if Thorold discovered that she had betrayed him. Thorold, for Gunlaug's sake, and the honor of his future maag, had promised Gunstein that she and Oyvind should never meet. Still she meant to see him.

She was no man's wife! She was free! She would go to him now that he had come. Noiselessly she groped around for her dress. With shoes in hand she approached the window, when a faint stir at her elbow frightened her. It was Gunhild.

"Go, child!" she sobbed, "I shall take the risk. You are breaking your heart, perhaps it will help you to see him. In the meantime I shall pray to Freya, to the Holy Mother. They will understand and pity two suffering women."

CHAPTER XIII

GUNLAUG experienced no difficulty in gaining the edge of the tun. Here she stopped to put on her shoes, listening the while for the repetition of the call. It sounded again from beneath her. It was as if the bird were sitting in a bush, growing halfways down the cliff. She made a faint reply and began carefully to work herself downward. At last she stood on a wide ledge halfway down. Here she stopped with the queer feeling one has in the presence of some unseen, living object.

A pair of arms were thrown about her, and she almost betrayed herself by a cry.

A warm cheek was laid against her face. It was Oyvind.

"At last I have you again, dearest, dearest," he whispered. "I have been thru the tortures of the damned since I sat in church and listened to the bans for you and Gunstein. How I have continued to live I can not tell. It seems that dreadful hands are dragging me down to an eternal abyss, such as Father Anselmo describes as the Christians' Hell. I can not live, Gunlaug, if they give you in wedlock to another man. It is against all laws, human and

Divine, that they should do that. You are mine by all tokens, you know that, dearest."

"I know it," she wept. "But I must obey, I can do nothing less. Besides, there is nothing that we can do, no place where we can go and live a chaste life as husband and wife. It was wrong, all wrong, Oyvind, that we sought to be together. We knew that for us no wedding-bells could ever ring, that none of God's anointed servants could ever bless our union and, without that blessing, the union we in our arrogance established is a sin. But it was all my fault, dearest. You begged me to give up the plan of meeting in secret. You begged me to let you go, when I would keep you in the grotto. Upon me let the punishment fall, let me atone——"

"Hush, Gunlaug, don't speak so," he admonished. "The fault is mine, and for what is illy done I am prepared to suffer. I shall give myself up to the goddess Hel, I shall enter in among the shades. I had dreamed that I should be vouchsafed the honor of dying on the battle-field and that, in triumph, the Valkyries would carry me to Valhalla, there to feast forever among heroes, slain in battle, but the dream is gone. Hel will receive me in her gloomy abode, for I must hence. It is not meet that an honorable matron should ever come face to face with two men that, by right, might call her wife. That time comes when you are wed to Gunstein. Do not weep, dearest. Did you not know it would be like that?"

"Oh, I don't know, Oyvind. I didn't know any-

thing, didn't think anything except of the fleeting moment. I thought only of myself, of the happiness I found in your companionship, in our great love, which I determined was mine by the grace of Freya and the Holy Mother. Alas, I see now they must have hidden their faces and wept at my waywardness."

"But, dearest," he whispered gently, "has it not occurred to you that Hel will receive us both? Her gloomy region of shades would become a paradise to me if you were there. Perhaps, too, since we do not die in our beds, the Valkyries may carry us to the feast in Valhalla. Let us hence, Gunlaug. Let us die together."

"Don't say such things, Oyvind," she moaned, shuddering. "Father Anselmo told me, in confession, not to add self-destruction to my other sins. Then he gave me absolution. But for the sin of self-destruction there is no absolution, no forgiveness, except, perhaps, thru ages of suffering in Purgatory. Oh, Oyvind! It is not the gloomy region of Hel that would receive us, but the eternal flames of the Christians' Hell. Oh, Oyvind, I fear the Christians' Hell, I fear their Devil, their eternal punishment."

Oyvind sighed. "These are dreadful times in which we live," he returned. "Fearful are the upheavals we have seen, fearful is the Christians' Devil and their Hell. But neither their God nor their Devil is as potent as the priests would have us believe, else why have they not more fear themselves?"

"Don't talk like that!" she chided him. "It sounds as tho you don't believe in the holiness of the priests. Father Alselmo gave me absolution for my sins. I want to believe that he has the power to do so. With his help and that of the Holy Mother and Freya I mean to set right, as far as in me lies, that which I have done amiss. I promised the good priest that I would quietly wed the man my father has chosen for me and make him a dutiful wife. I also promised to observe every penance he laid upon me.

"Gunstein has forgiven that which he knows about us, and he has promised my father that he'll never point the finger of scorn at me for my frailty or its possible outcome. I think, tho, that my life will be cut mercifully short, Oyvind. Women of my fiery nature die easily from a broken heart. Then, when we are dead, we shall belong together, not in the gloomy abode below the earth, given over to Hel, but in the radiant Heaven that belongs to the Christians. Here we shall live in an exalted relation so pure, so fine as not to be conceived below. Live, dearest. Try to see with the eyes given us thru the new religion, and live to make things right! You can not straighten them out by jumping away from everything into the tjern."

"You see things so differently from my way," he said, "and I am glad of it, for it helps you to be happy. As for me, there is only one step that I can take. I have irrevocably decided to take it, so let us

not dwell any longer on the subject. We have so little time together. Shall I see you again, dearest, or must I wait till the cold hand of death has transformed our palpitating young beings into spirits which, according to the priest, have neither warmth nor substance? Shall I see you again in the flesh?"

"I shall see you again," she whispered, "if not sooner, then the evening before I become the wife to Gunstein."

CHAPTER XIV

ONLY one day remained before the wedding. Guests had already begun to gather. The feasting had already begun. The poorer people, who had come long ways on foot, were being served with bread and ale in the tun, while those from the higher strata of life, who had come in their own vehicles or on horseback, were regaled in the guest-hall with mead and honey-cakes. The tun presented a lively scene. Guests, in gala costumes, strutted about, horses with curving necks and steaming bodies, pawed impatiently, grooms hurried about, the smiling serving-women and waiting-maids were everywhere present. There was a riot of sound, too. There were laughter and loud conversation, barking of dogs and from various groups, ranged along the stone-wall, enclosing the tun, came the sounds of harps and of singing.

In the women's building sat the sewing girls, putting the last touches to the garments they had fashioned for their mistress. There were things made from vadmel and from linen, cloaks, dresses, skirts. There were blankets, table-cloths, towels, and sheets, there were hangings for walls, doors, and windows.

The weavers had already escaped into the tun and were enjoying the excitement that prevailed among the assorted humanity which had poured into Thorold's gaard. They would have a long holiday, no more cloth was required for a long time, and they were out while the others were impatiently putting away the finished work. The morrow would be a great day, the day of the wedding!

The hour before sunset arrived. It was then, as behooved a good daughter, that Gunlaug must go to her father and thank him for all the kindness she had received, all the happiness she had enjoyed in her old home. This was her last day, as a child, in her father's house. When she next came she would be a wife, one who had started housekeeping on her own account, one who had begun an independent existence, as far as her father was concerned.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and her voice was choked by sobs as she stammered forth the words such as the occasion required. Thorold was deeply touched. With sorrow he had observed that his daughter had been unhappy. He would actually have welcomed an opportunity of breaking with Gunstein, but that was a thing unheard of in the North. The wedding must take place!

His words gave no clue to his thoughts, as with studied formality he assured Gunlaug that she had always been an exemplary daughter and ended the ceremony by exhorting her to be a good wife to Gunstein.

The interview chilled Gunlaug. She would have given everything she possessed for the privilege of creeping into his arms and, as when she was a small child, weep out all the horror and heartbreak that were consuming her. But the studied formality drove her into herself. She seemed to be struggling thru a prolonged, cumbersome dream.

From her father's house she, with her maids, went on her round to the reception-hall. Here everything was spick and span. The floor and wooden benches, stiffly set along the walls, were as white as sand and water could make them. The floor of the raised platform, reserved for the bridal party, was covered with skins of the goat and the sheep, carefully tanned. On the chairs and benches were spread the pelts of wild animals that had been slain by the arrow and the spear, hurled from Thorold's mighty arm. These, too, were tanned, soft as silk. Nothing was too fine or too good for the woman of the North on her "honor day," which was proper.

The huge fire-places at the ends of the hall were filled with great armfuls of evergreens, adding their pungent odor to the atmosphere and another festive touch to the appointment. Upon the walls hung tapestries and various weapons, brought by Thorold from his Viking-raids. There were scraps of Oriental rugs, too, and a long strip of cloth, embroidered in coarse, woolen threads, depicting the struggle of the Norsemen. First it showed them after their early advent into the North, struggling against their

natural enemies, the Jøtuls. The second showed them fighting their supernatnral enemies, the Frost-giants. The last showed them in their long-boats, invading an enemy country.

There were also weapons, such as were used in the North, huge axes, sheath-knives and spears of all sizes. There was one spear among them of which Thorold was especially proud, a feathered spear, not very long, but gold-handled. It had been the possession of his mother's grandfather, Harald Haarfagre, the first man who became sole ruler over the Norsemen.

There were shields of all descriptions, from the tiny, ox-hide buckler to the great body-shield, calculated as protection for the entire person. These were mostly brought into the North as trophies. The same was true of the armor. There were helmets and breast-plates, there were head-coverings which Thorold had worn during his raid, surmounted by head and wings of the eagle. Not a man in the whole length and breadth of the land could show a collection like Thorold's, and today they shone in their pristine lustre from their recent polish.

The way from there led to the guest-hall, obliquely across the tun. Two tables running along the entire length of the room had been covered with spotless linen and were being set. The girls were bringing out great trenchers of bread and cakes, dried goats' flesh and cured pork, things that would take no hurt from being left on the table over night.

The floor, scrubbed to snowy whiteness, was strewn with white sand laid out in phantastic patterns; the benches, set close to the tables on both sides, were uncovered, but here, too, the "high-seat" and the chairs, set off for the bride and groom, with their followings, were covered with fine, tanned skins of wild animals.

The larder, built on sturdy piles, driven into the ground, stood a little back of the guest-hall. Here were great stacks of flat-bread, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, many carcasses of freshly killed animals, slabs of dried meat, butts of ale and mead and huge barrels of salted fish. Evidently there was no danger that Thorold's guests would suffer, even tho the wedding should take a month instead of only a week.

From the brewery butts of mead and ale were being rolled to the larder, and the attendants were applying the finishing touches that should emphasize the holiday aspect even here. The same thing was true of the bakery. Everything here was scoured to dazzling whiteness. The last load of baked stuff had been taken to the larder, and the great stone-oven stood open to be aired. Benches and tables were ranged along the walls, the floor was scrubbed and sand-strewn. In a group by themselves stood the maids, whispering and tittering. Many were the handsome carls who had ridden into the tun, a week was to be given over to joy and amusement, and a wedding was always filled with endless possibilities.

In the huge kitchen the women were perspiring over the preparation of roasts, while stews were already bubbling in the iron caldrons. They would be ready for the dinner on the morrow.

In the paddock, near the gate, their coats and hoofs polished till they shone, stood the horses that were a part of Gunlaug's dowry. A little farther down, as if jealous of too much observation, stood the little white mare with her colt, also a part of the bride's portion and Gunlaug's pet. Besides these there were cattle and sheep and goats. Thorold was giving his daughter in a manner that behooved his kind.

As in a new light Gunlaug saw the loneliness that would come to her father with her going away. She had not been much company to the silent man, but she understood now that her comings and her goings, her happy companions, as they filled the tun with their laughter and song, had meant much to him. Now he would feel all this as a sudden, direct loss. How she wished she had been a better daughter to him, that she had trusted to him more fully! Perhaps he could have saved her from herself, from the curse of her false philosophy!

In the tun the stev-singers were vying with one another in improvizing ballads. These were in the form of a text, sung first by one, then by another. Usually one was a man's, the other a woman's part. There were present a number of skalds, too, some known over the whole Northland.

Standing together with their harps under arm stood Attar Svarte and Sigvat Skald. Attar Svarte had come with a Viking-crew from Frankland, and for some time he took service with Olaf. Of late he was yielding to his desire to follow the king's road to the uttermost valleys of the land.

With outstretched hand, Thorold approached the musicians and led them into the guest-hall.

"How fares it at Nidaros?" he asked while his guests were being served. "And our Olaf, is he as harsh on the old gods as when last I saw him, which was in the winter?"

Attar Svarte shrugged. "It is not easy to know what he wills at all times," he replied, taking a huge bite of cold venison. "Ill satisfied is he very often."

"They're all loyal to the White Christ up along the coast, then, is it so, friend?" asked Thorold.

Attar laughed and looked around him. "If these walls have not ears I will tell you about Sigurd Thoreson," he said. "Sigurd accepted Christianity, but continued the old way with the feasts. From far and near they flocked to his hall. Then Asbjørn came to lay death-hand on Sigurd. With his great ax he struck the blow. The stroke took Sigurd in the neck so his head fell off. It rolled before the king on the table-cloth, which became soiled. Then Olaf was angry. Spjalg Erlingson tried to defend Asbjørn, but Olaf said:

"'It is one matter of death to kill a man at

Easter-tide and another matter of death to kill a man in the king's presence. You have made of my feet an executioner's block! It is illy done!'

"'It is illy done as it displeases thee,' returned Spjalg, 'otherwise it is excellently done!'

"Then the king took many prisoners, some he put in irons, some he maimed, and Asbjørn, who did Olaf's bidding, was beheaded."

Thorold sighed. "The old order is going fast. He is victorious in the Northland, the White Christ."

In the tun the two skalds met another of their number, Thormod Kolbrunarskald from Nidaros, where he was in service under Olaf. None was more welcome than Thormod, and the others greeted him warmly.

"Is it possible that Olaf might come this day and help celebrate the 'honor-day' of my daughter?" asked Thorold after the proper greetings were exchanged.

Thormod shook his head.

"The king is too busy subduing the heathens," he assured Thorold. "If you lay aside all attention to the old gods he'll probably not come!"

Thorold paled under the ruddy tan. Without more ado he went to his chief dreng. After a whispered consultation the boy went to find others of his kind. Together they went into the woods. There, in an inclosure, they found some goats and a young horse. Without a word they opened the gate and let them out. Mumbling fierce oaths and impreca-

tions over some one they swiftly returned to their quarters.

"There should be, in these parts, a young skald, named Oyvind," said Thormod Kolbrunarskald, toying with the strings of his instrument, listening to the vibrating sounds, "I expected to see him here."

"It is a sad story," returned Sigvat Skald. "He roams in the forest and seems afraid of people. It is feared that he is smitten with the evil eye, or — what is worse — that he has been mountain-taken."

Here the three musicians crossed themselves, but they prayed to Odin, to Freya. These were the old, trusted gods, but, in fear of losing life and limb, they were prompt in using the sign by which the Christians were so well known.

CHAPTER XV

THE transparent gloom of the summer night was gathering, and the candles had been lighted in the women's building. It was now the hour when Gunlaug was to inspect the fine linens her maids so faithfully had worked for her, the chests full of bridal finery and the woolen cloth. There were clothes for the every day use and for use on holidays and the Sabbath. Surely the supply would last her all her days.

The first smile they had seen on her face for a long time was their reward.

"I have enough things to last me a hundred years!" she cried, "and such nice little stitches!"

With trembling fingers Gunhild brought out the wedding gown and the accessories. It was made of crimson silk with full, short skirt, a black, embroidered bodice, sleeves and bosom of white linen, fine as the gossamer that floats on the still evening air. The crown was of Norse workmanship. It had been made of filigreed silver for Thorstein Galge's daughter, who had been Thorold's second wife. The gown was much older. On the morning the young girl would be arrayed in these trappings of foregone generations.

The fine, white underwear, the golden girdle, the glittering buckles, the tiny, pointed shoes, made from fine goat-skin, all were duly admired by the open-mouthed maids. But around Gunlaug's heart there seemed to lay a cold, gripping hand.

Back in her chamber she sank down in thought. This day she had always viewed thru a haze of romance, the day when all her finery would be spread before her. The day before her "honor-day," when all would be complete with the fairy-prince, amid music and singing, coming on the morrow, riding in splendor into her father's tun!

Alas for her! The fairy prince had come, but had been rudely thrust from his realm. Another — fat, bald, old enough to be her father, had been projected between them. It were better not to dwell too long with that. She must obey her father, it was better than seeking her death in the tjern, better than submitting to the punishment of an eternal Hell-fire. She would see Oyvind that night, perhaps she could dissuade him from his wild desire to end his days in Blackwater Tjern.

CHAPTER XVI

MIDSUMMER day lingers long in the North. The musicians were loth to leave the congenial company and the refreshments before the last rays of the sun had disappeared. Oyvind, this the last day of his life, had to wait long for Gunlaug.

He sat sunken in bitter retrospection. His life had always been lonely. As a child he had been away from all children, and in his early youth he had been only a little less alone. He had never experienced the tender care of a mother or known the guiding hand of a father. His only relative was his maternal aunt, an ascetic, disappointed woman, who had fed him well, according to her circumstances, who had kept him well dressed, but who had overlooked his warm, hungry heart.

Even as a child he made friends with the wild things of nature. He loved the towering pines and the tiny plants at their feet. He understood the laughing brooks, the singing birds, and the sighing tree-tops. Even the great silence held something for him. But he yearned for love, for human companionship. It gave him a gentleness towards all helpless things and the wistfulness that lay in his big,

purple eyes, at which even the grown-ups wondered whenever they took time to observe him.

The great day in his child-life was when he received his harp. It was the result of a painful experience, too. His aunt, at that time, was much sought as a helper to prepare foods for the feasts. In this way Oyvind saw much festivity. The thing that attracted him, however, was not the food and drink, nor even the noise and fun. It was the music. Melodies of all kinds exerted a strong influence over him from his earliest childhood. It was a common thing to observe him, seated in a little corner near the musicians, weeping as if his little heart would burst while the music rolled from the strings.

One winter night when he was about nine years old they were at a grand wedding. The harper had laid his instrument aside and had stepped to the table. Oyvind sat spell-bound, as with hypnotized eyes he watched the magic instrument from which had flowed the wonderful melodies. Almost without conscious volition he glided towards the harp, then, lightly as the zephyr touches the petals of a flower, he laid his fingers on the strings.

They gave forth the very sound he had in mind, and almost in a frenzy he plucked on. The sounds that issued from the instrument were in perfect harmony and he stood there, listening to the sweet tones, scarcely breathing, lest he lose a single vibration!

He received a rude awakening. His aunt had ob-

served him and was horrified. She grabbed him by the shoulder and not only jerked him out of his fairy-land of sweet sounds, but rushed him out from the hall. Out from the lights and sounds, that transformed his humdrum life into a brief taste of Paradise, she rushed him into the drenge-quarter. Here she left him in dense darkness.

"I'll teach you to meddle with a man's harp!" she cried harshly, as she sent him thru the door and fastened it behind him.

"Please take me back!" wept Oyvind, trying to open the door which she was busily barricading from the outside. "I shall be so good, so good! I want to hear the harp! And it is so cold here, so dark! I am afraid! Please — —!"

"Just you keep still!" shouted the aunt from the outside. "Is it not enough that I drag you with me wherever I go, to be in people's way, without your meddling like that? I guess this will make you a good boy!"

And so she went back to the light and warmth and music from which, without realizing her cruelty, she had ejected the little one with the wistful eyes and the lonely heart.

He crept into the corner of the huge fire-place. Among the ashes a few embers were still alive and there were some chips in the corner of the room. Soon he sat crouching over a tiny flame that cheered him with its company. Then he sat up straight. Firm steps sounded on the snow outside. Had his

aunt changed her mind? She did that sometimes, his aunt. Was she now coming to take him back to the guest-hall?

The door opened slowly. A head, under a bear-skin cap, was projected into the opening, and a pair of broad shoulders followed. A tall man it was who entered. Oyvind knew him.

"Guthorm Halsen!" he cried, hopping down from where he sat and running towards the man. "Did you come to take me back?"

Never was Oyvind so glad as when Guthorm Halsen noticed him. Many was the time when he had met Guthorm in the woods, and always he had told him such wonderful stories of elves and pixies, and of nøkken, that lives in the still pools.

Guthorm laughed just such a big hearty laugh as one expects from a big man, as he took the little fellow in his arms. But around the edge of it was the sound of tears. He was so lonely, the little one, in the cold and darkness, but for the tiny gleam he had coaxed from the smouldering embers. And there was so much of light and joy and sound across the tun. Perhaps it was because Guthorm was so lonely in his home up there on the mountain-side, called Skallet, that he felt such deep sympathy for the little orphan; but never had he shown it so fully as now.

"Yes, Oyvind, you're coming back with me," he said after a pause. "The old folks are all thru eating, and there are the most wonderful things for little boys. And when you've had all you can eat

you're going to have a nice little corner all to yourself, right up, close to the harper. You'll be able to hear all the melodies."

Even now, as Oyvind sat alone in the gathering gloom of midsummer night so many years later, the warmth of that wonderful evening crept back into his heart, and he smiled as if it had been a pleasant dream or a vision from wonderland.

A few days later his aunt handed him a harp. It had been left there by a pixie, she told him. The little boy had been too happy in his marvelous possession to care where it came from. But one day in spring, while he sat playing a little melody he had learned from a brook, he looked up and saw Guthorm standing before him. Like a flash it came to him that he was the giver. He jumped to his feet:

"Thank you, Guthorm of Skallet, for giving me this fine harp!" he cried.

Guthorm's face clouded. "Did your aunt tell you?" he asked.

"No, no!" stammered Oyvind in sudden alarm, "I only know you did."

Guthorm patted the curly head: "If it makes you happy, boy, you may as well know that I did, but this is between you and me. I did not want you to get yourself into trouble touching other people's harps."

Then Oyvind played him a melody that the north wind had sung in the tree-tops. Something came into Guthorm's eyes which he wiped away with his

big rough hand. Strange that a big man should have the same kind of a heart as a little boy, thought Oyvind.

Before he walked away Guthorm took the child in his arms and gently stroked the yellow head that lay against his shoulder. Then, without a word, he set the little fellow down and walked away. Oyvind never spoke of the incident, but he never forgot the man's friendliness. All thru his lonely childhood Guthorm's kindness illuminated his path like a single candle in the night. Even now, as he sat there, staring into the gloomy tjern that so soon should close over his inanimate body, the memory of Guthorm's goodness to him warmed his heart with its customary feeling of gladness.

His harp had always been his dearest possession. It opened a new world for him among the fairy sisters of sound, light, and color. It blazed a trail for him straight thru to people's hearts. No gathering, after that, was complete without Oyvind with his harp, and they called him Oyvind the Skald. How proudly his heart expanded whenever he heard himself so called! Like others of his associates he loved the memory of his great name-sake, Oyvind the Skald, who over a generation before him had brought forth his wonderful melodies.

As a child he had been thrilled at the story of the silver buttons, the gift of his admirers to the singer of sagas, and his heart had been filled with sympathy when he learned that his idol had been obliged to

barter his treasure for the bare necessities of life. Ah, and there were many a lout in those days who knew not the difference between melodies, living in affluence while his adored singer of songs was compelled to live in abject poverty! But to be named Oyvind the Skald! It was an honor he had never imagined when as a boy Oyvind the Skald of history had been the hero of his waking thoughts and of his dreams.

A great appeal lay in Oyvind's music. Whoever heard it knew that his melodies had lived always, that they would continue to live in one form or another as long as there were skilled fingers to draw them forth. They had been a part of their existence, had been formed from the beginning of things, would exist till the dreadful day which, according to the priest, was to end all earthly things.

Then he met Gunlaug. That is, he had always known her, but one night he played for the carls and maidens while they danced on the wold in the moonlight and she stood near, listening to his harp. He looked up and his eyes rested for a moment in hers. Again he bent over his instrument, but it was as a new being. He gave himself up to a new sensation, a strange dizziness which gave way to a happy exaltation. For the first time in his life he felt himself to be very important, and his harp sang a brand new song. It sang with such a wonderful swing that the young people crowded about in wonder, all but Gunlaug. She stood with folded hands,

with a new light in her eyes, listening. It was as if she heard and understood that which was meant for her alone.

Again he looked up and met her eyes. It was while she was dancing past, and the look she gave him was so different from her ordinary laughing glances. It was serious, almost wistful. It was a part of the new melody, it explained all the soft wood-land sounds in early spring. Even now, his pulses quickened at the recollection.

For two years he worshiped her in silence, scarcely daring to breathe her name. It was only on festive occasions he was able to feast his hungry eyes on her beauty. Sometimes, in passing, her dress or strands of her hair touched him, and he received it as a caress. Sometimes he was even able to hold her hand for a moment, in greeting. As a skald his position was sufficiently high so he could have led her in the dance, but he held off. The very thought of the intoxicating nearness of her, as a partner in the dance, nearly took his breath. He was going to be quite contented to worship her at a distance. She was to him almost as one of the Christians' saints. He would do nothing to break the spell.

Gradually a burning desire for an open expression of his love took possession of him. He must tell her how wonderfully she was making up to him for his lonely childhood. He would tell her all she meant to him; then he would never mention the subject again. He would be satisfied.

Then came the second day in February with the Candlemas feast. With the pent-up power of his long-endured passion he drew her from the cold embrace of her dance-partner into his own, the throbbing, intoxicating arms of the lover. But the satiety he had fondly expected failed him. Every thought of the few ecstatic moments filled him with an uncontrollable longing for her that amounted to a real pain.

It almost overpowered him, at times, this intense desire for the time when they could meet, not with a stolen hand-shake, but heart to heart as they had stood that night within the inky shadow of the pine.

Then came the meeting in the woods, the grotto, the weeks filled with the insane ecstasy they never attempted to name. They had lived in a realm of their own making, their heads above the clouds, cut off from all earth-binding forms and traditions. It was a realm within which there was no room for another human being, where they took no thought, where they asked no question of the morrow.

Then their kingdom was invaded. Their fairy-land was turned into a vale of tears and blind despair. They whose heart-fibres seemed to be intwined were rudely separated, a third party thrust between. Now came the thoughts, now came the question.

And the answer to the question? Oyvind's answer was — the tjern! He had only one means by which he could make Gunlaug an honest woman, so

the voice of his conscience whispered, his life. He would give that. He groaned in his anguish. It had been so hopeless from the first — she, the daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller! He had always known that her father would never permit the marriage to take place. Why had he not, then, been man enough to keep aloof from the girl? Why had he not had the sense to foresee this day? Then they would not now have been so endlessly unhappy, so endlessly afraid!

CHAPTER XVI

HEN she came to him. There were no tears that night. Their grief was too deep for any expression as they stood in unending embrace, her hands folded behind his neck.

"Live, Oyvind, live!" she implored. "The world is so big and no corner is so far away that a Northman has not found. There are honors to be won in the land of the Franks, in Gardarike, in the lands of the Engles and the Scots. A skald is welcome everywhere. Or, you needn't leave the Northland. You can take service with Olaf. Thormod Kolbrunarskald is here, from Nidaros. He asked about you. Ylve said so, he has heard of your sagas and harp-music, even at the court of the king! Try, Oyvind! Live!"

Her entreaties fell on dull ears.

"Don't let us waste time on this useless talk, dearest!" he begged. "It is for you I die, for your honor and mine. Say no more, but promise me that you'll try to be reconciled to this, that you'll not allow this to rob you of your happiness. Promise me that you'll try to extract from life such measures of joy as the gods have portioned out as your share. The cup of happiness will some day be held to your

lips; but if you refuse to drink, it may pass you by forever.

"Promise me that when you part from me to-night you'll bid farewell to all that has been sad and unlovely in the past, and keep your heart open to receive that which shall compensate. If you're unwilling to do this, then the injury I have done you is irreparable. I give my life in vain! Promise me that you'll be brave and take the best life offers you, or I feel that I die with the curse of your woe and grief upon my heart! Promise me, dearest, that you will do as I ask!"

With trembling lips she promised. There was little to say after that, little time, too. She was stumbling on towards the cliff she must climb in order to reach Gunhild, when her foot struck a sounding object. It was Oyvind's harp — broken. With clumsy fingers she attempted to adjust the torn strings. Then, as if she realized the futility of further endeavor, she knelt for a moment, laying it down. Slowly, tenderly as one places a sleeping infant in a cradle, she laid it on the grass.

Like one in an awful dream she climbed the cliff and crossed the tun to where her cousin stood waiting for her. They spoke no words, those two. They understood one another.

And now, for a moment, we'll return to Oyvind.

The strange events that are herewith chronicled must be interpreted according to the reader's own light. Had they been recorded in some legend or

saga of old for the wives to tell their little ones at eventide? Did they grow out of Oyvind's mental aberration that followed when he fully saw himself in the light of other eyes, perhaps those of his Maker? Did they grow from his soul-sickness when he realized his transgression, and the consequent break in his spiritual armor making him an easy prey to the voice that whispered of the paths of least resistance? Is the story true? Strange things came to pass in the misty period nearly a thousand years back in time. Again, let us say that as the reader sees so will he judge. And so we must let the story go on.

CHAPTER XVII

GYVIND sat motionless for a few moments after Gunlaug's form, silhouetted against the grey-blue sky, had disappeared. Then he let himself down, from cliff to cliff, till he stood on the sandy beach of the tjern. A boat lay drawn up on land. He would borrow that. It would surely float back to land after he should be done with it.

His oars dipped noiselessly into the dark waters of the tjern. Over him twinkled a heaven full of stars, dimmed by the transparency of the midsummer night which was, after all, a mere twilight, delicately merging the evening with the dawn. In her regal beauty the full moon looked down upon him from the zenith, and the cool breeze from the snow-clad mountain tops fell as a soothing touch upon his fevered forehead. The spicy odors of the conifers were in his nostrils, and the noisy quiet of the night among the trees and mountains, closely encircling the tjern, lay upon him as the comforting hand of a comrade. A hoot-owl sat in a low bush near the margin of the water; a cuckoo's call came from a small birch leading a precarious existence in a crevice high up on the rugged side of the cliff; a nightingale sat in a low bush whose leaves gracefully

hung over the tjern and let loose its wonderful runs and trills. What a world it was, after all! He would not hurry. He would wait till the first rays of the day that gave Gunhild to another man should dye the distant top of Ditmorpiggen.

But even this was but putting off the evil moment. He shivered as he leaned back, letting the boat rest or move as it might list, while, as a condemned criminal on his way to execution, he observed all the beauties about him with the heaviness of an eternal farewell tugging at his heart.

With a mighty effort he cast it all from him. For a few blissful hours he would forget all else in the contemplation of the beauty around him, while he should enjoy the sweet odors of trees and flowers, the majesty of the primal forest and lofty mountains, the radiance of the moon. Oyvind the dreamer, the poet, the fanatic, the idealist, what could he do but love the transcendent beauty of his surroundings? What could he do but dread the cold and slime of the tjern?

His thoughts gradually became chaotic with one idea clear and insistent. His sin had found him out. What had it done to him? The question was no longer, What had it done to Gunlaug? What had it done to society? It was, What had it done to him? Something whispered that it had unfitted him for life. Now he wanted to know why. Suddenly it came. It had weakened him, making him wish to die because that was the easier way! Suppose he lived on? What

then? What derangement would he suffer from during the rest of his days? What power existed that would free him from the dreadful things he had learned to recognize in himself? Then he rubbed his eyes. Had he taken the fatal plunge after all? Was he now entering the realm of Hel? Gone were the tjern, the mountains, the night-noises! Gone the heavens with the moon and stars! He was gliding forward thru a narrow tunnel, looking towards a wide valley. The tunnel was so narrow he could touch the walls and the roof, but it was widening out on a sandy beach that separated its waters from the level wold and, surely, it was the same moon, the same stars above that gradually appeared before him!

The valley began at the point where the tunnel merged with the outside, stretching out mile-wide, into the hazy distance. On the wold, revealed by the moonlight, he saw herds of fat cattle, and several women among them. They saw him and came running. He was still sitting in the boat when they approached and tried to throw their fire-irons over him. He had not crossed into the land of Hel then, he had arrived among the underearthlings. Instantly he murmured a prayer and made the sign of the cross. It saved him from being mountain-taken and coming under the everlasting control of an elf-maid. For the iron fell into the water at his side.

They were handsome women, and most of them were young. Their bodies were straight and tall, broad-shouldered and deep-bosomed, as they are apt

to be on women who fare much in the woodland. Their faces were waxy white, their eyes and hair coal-black. It was not their complexions, strange as that was to a Northman, that struck Oyvind — it was the heavy look of hopelessness that lay on their features. They were many and they were young, but not a smile lighted up their faces, not a snatch of song came to their lips. They looked as if they knew not the meaning of either. As if they never had known the meaning, nay, more than that, as if, from the dawn of history, none of them had ever laughed, had ever sung. By the looks of their faces it was plainly to be seen that none of them ever expected to sing, to laugh, or to feel the tiniest sense of happiness.

A vague thrill of terror struck his heart and he looked back for an avenue of escape. How he wished he had taken Gunlaug's advice and tried to live. Behind him the mountain had closed. He was trapped, at the mercy of the underearthlings! As his boat had moved forward the mountain had closed behind him.

There was little motion among the underearthlings. They stood stolidly looking at him. Then quickly, as a flock of birds taking sudden flight, they were gone! Where they went, he could not see, all he knew was his thankfulness that they were off, that it was the midnight hour, after which no underearthling dared remain under the stars.

He was not alone, however, for on the shore

stood a small, grotesque figure beckoning to him. He was only about four feet tall, but his body, above the waist, was large as that of a full-grown man, while his limbs from the waist down were small and misshapen. He had a hunch on his back, and his arms were so long that his large fists almost touched the ground.

The hunchback was evidently an earthling and spoke to Oyvind in his own vernacular.

"You are wanted inside of the mountain," he said, "for this Mokakala has opened the passage."

There was no other course open to the skald, so he followed the hunchback from the shore, across where the underearthlings had stood, gaping at him. The hunchback stopped at the mountain wall, rising vertically above them. He removed from a crevice a small rock, pressed a projection that appeared and stood back. A low, rumbling sound followed, a great, jagged rock shot out sideways, past them, leaving an opening that seemed to lead into the very heart of the mountain. Without a word the strange little man took Oyvind by the hand and led him along the passage.

They had walked some distance when, beyond the mouth of this second tunnel, a strange landscape appeared. It was different from anything Oyvind had ever dreamed of, for there was not a tree, not a blade of grass, nor a bird nor the sign of any other animal. In his wildest fantasies, under a midsummer night's moon, he had not pictured half its weirdness.

They stepped out of the tunnel into what appeared to be a basin several miles wide, and so long they could not see its farther end. Indeed it was a rocky cavern, so vast that the arched dome above might almost have been the heavens. The entire region was illuminated by myriads of lights, giving off a radiance that resembled diffused sunlight. The lights were like milk-white torches, flaming overhead and, obeying the law of perspective, becoming mere specks in the far distance.

When they emerged from the tunnel the rock shot back and left not a scratch to mark the opening. Oyvind pinched himself to make sure he was awake. Under foot lay a deep layer of sand as far as the eye could reach, covering the rocks like a blanket. By way of ornamentation, beautifully colored rocks had been raised in rows, along the highways and before the buildings.

In the distance was a group of houses, like a good-sized town. It was towards this they were going. They passed groups of underearthlings, the hunchback being ever on the watch, as if he were afraid that some harm might befall his companion. They passed a group of maidens, weaving an enormous, green carpet. One of them, her hand thrust in her bosom, rose and followed Oyvind and his companion.

Her face was of that waxy whiteness common to underearthlings, but her lips were scarlet and her cheeks were faintly red. Her eyes were black and

lustrous, her hair hung in great, black coils down her back, her body was tall and slender, with deep chest and magnificently formed bosom. On the whole, she was the most beautiful woman Oyvind had ever seen.

The other workers merely looked up with inscrutable eyes and went on with their labor. Again he noted the strange sorrow that brooded over them, the stony despair written in every face. For a moment Oyvind looked away from the girl, then with a gesture, quick as lightning, she raised her hand from her bosom. A fire-iron glinted in her hand. In a second it would have whizzed over his head, but the hunchback, who was continually on the watch, sprang forward and roared out a name:

"Launa!"

Again the girl's hand traveled to her bosom. She drew it back empty, turned away and walked on, almost in the same direction Oyvind and his companion were taking. On they went again, after the momentary interruption, the hunchback ever on the watch.

They passed many groups of people, always engaged in some form of occupation. One group were making cheese, another cutting up carcasses of newly killed cattle, and some were preparing and salting great butts of fish for curing. There were carpenters at work, masons, blacksmiths, and stonecutters; all working in little groups, suggestive of specialized labor.

As in the former groups of people, he again ob-

served the dull hopelessness suggested by the expression of their faces and in their attitude. It seemed they were living because they had no choice in the matter, and without the slightest interest in the process. It was almost as if their bodies housed dreadful spirits which in some way lacked the principle which makes one really human. They seemed absolutely without feeling save for the heartbreak and sullen despair that lived in their eyes.

He had seen wildly unhappy people, a man who in the sudden frenzy of a deep sorrow took his own life, a woman who gradually sank under a load of grief to her death. This was unlike either. He felt he was looking upon a people who were acquainted with sorrow too terrible for expression, too deep to vent in weeping, too all-absorbing to forget, even during the fleeting moment of a smile! It filled him with a dread he lacked words to define.

Oyvind and the hunchback stopped before a white palace, standing within an enclosure, in the middle of the town. It was built of white marble and the high walls that surrounded it were built from hewn granite. Several gates, guarded by men in uniform, led to the grounds, which presented a flat terrain, covered, as was the rest of the surface, with deep layers of sand. In the front of the palace was a pond edged with white stones, and in its center played a fountain. Here and there bright-colored rocks and great slabs of agatized wood polished to mirror brightness were displayed.

The front of the palace presented a row of massive pillars holding up a roof, extending over a terrace, leading to a wide veranda. From the veranda, massive doors opened into a wide antechamber. They had reached the first step to the terrace when the hunchback turned to Oyvind:

"Stand here till I return," he said. "Let no one engage your attention, above all things don't let any of these hussies throw their fire-irons over you. If that should happen you would immediately become mountain-taken, and it was not for this that Mokakala opened the passage for an earthling."

The hunchback disappeared behind a huge column, and Oyvind stood still, looking about him. He meant to be on his guard, for he knew the meaning of that dreadful condition known as being mountain-taken.

There was Harek Kolbjørnsen. Oyvind knew him well. Many were the stories current about him. People spoke of him spending his days in the forest and mountains, searching for the elf-maiden who had thrown her fire-iron over him and so had full sway. It was whispered that she had changed the unfortunate man into a being that at times was so dreadful, so unhuman that its very name was wont to bring a pallor upon the cheeks of the strongest. He thought of it now with a nameless dread and crossed himself. Oyvind was far from accepting the new religion, but this was a case with which he felt the old gods were unable to cope, else why had they not protected Harek?

A sound behind him caused him to turn. He looked straight into Launa's burning eyes, which, with her scarlet lips, her lithe, young body exerted a hypnotic influence over him from which he was unable to withdraw. But for the movements of her bosom, which rose and fell with feverish frequency, she might have been a waxen figure. There was no expression on her face except that brooding despair which seemed much more pronounced in the women than in the men. She resembled a votary at some heathen shrine, ready to give her body to the flames in her zealous worship.

This was what the hunchback had foreseen. He tried to take his eyes from her face, but she held him. Into her face leaped a sudden flame which spoke all that her lips refused to utter, wholly intoxicating him. A mist came before his eyes and thru the mist the face of the elf-maiden became Gunlaug's. He opened his arms to her, but she receded, beckoning him to follow.

It was Gunlaug who ran before him, therefore he followed. He had been mistaken after all. He was in the land of Hel! She had thrown herself into the tjern and had found him. It was strange that the same passions should actuate him now, that he was a shade, as those with which he had been familiar during his earth-life! His blood ran warm and swift as in his greatest moments on earth!

These ideas were not clear in his brain. They lay behind his thoughts of Gunlaug, as a disordered fig-

ment of the ones that centered around the elf-maiden. She preceded him into a narrow chasm which led out of the broad valley, and in between perpendicular mountain walls, among which no light penetrated. Here in the mystic darkness she turned, gave him her hand and, with him following, she still sped on.

On they ran, over sharp stones and across unseen crevices, where he would have stumbled had she not steadied him by the firm hold of her hand. It was so dark now that he could only see the nape of her neck where it rose from her dark dress, and her fluttering hand as hazy blurs on the curtain of darkness before them.

Suddenly she turned with a low cry of mixed fear and triumph. The next moment he pressed her close to him, bending his head again and again, kissing her warm mouth. She struggled to free her right hand, which she plunged into her bosom.

In another minute the fire-iron would whizz over his head, and for all time his peace of soul would be lost. For never is the mountain-taken to know any peace except during two hours under the full moon, when the elf-maiden, who has won him, can escape from the mountain and search him out. But Oyvind heeded not the danger. It was Gunlaug he held in his arms, it was her breath that was fanning his face. In another moment all would be over, for no gleam of enlightenment entered his soul. In another moment he would be where no human aid could reach him!

A strong hand shot out of the darkness. It

separated Oyvind and the girl. It was that of the hunchback. Oyvind came back to his senses with the first word the dwarf uttered, the girl's name:

"Launa!"

What more he said, Oyvind knew not, for he spoke in a language foreign to him. Then he turned to Oyvind:

"I warned you," he snarled. "Have nothing to do with these reptiles! Beware of them! There is nothing in your experience of life to teach you the depravity of these creatures or the depths to which they will descend to win an earthling to their filthy ways! Beware of them; not one is fit to mate with an earthling! It is not for that Mokakala opened the passage in the mountain to let you in!"

Again Oyvind heard that name. Who was this Mokakala? Evidently the ruler of this mysterious kingdom. He hoped he might see the personage, for his fate lay not on the knees of the gods, it was with Mokakala.

Silently Oyvind followed the hunchback towards the lights that twinkled in the distance. Launa had slunk away among the crevices of the mountain, and the spell was still sufficiently strong so his thoughts were mainly occupied by her. Would he ever see her again? he wondered. Tho he was happy in his deliverance he was not ready to bless the deliverer. The hunchback divined his attitude:

"Don't you know the underearthlings are people without souls?" he asked. "Don't you know they

are mere animals without any of the finer qualities of the human, so low, so filthy that your very heart would cringe within you should I describe them."

Oyvind wondered at the strange words as he silently followed his leader. Perhaps this was true, but it was not all. That they were without souls did not explain the crushing sorrow depicted on every face. He was well acquainted with the wild forest-things which are believed to have no souls, and they were happy. The birds sang, the squirrels played. He had even caught a staid old bear playing with the cubs and the rest of the family.

The few moments he had spent in the subterranean kingdom had shown him that its inhabitants were absolutely devoid of happiness. They were a people under a curse. They could not laugh, nor sing, nor play. The wild animals, moving freely under God's heaven, never suffered from any such curse as these, he knew that full well. Did the hunchback know, he wondered.

Again they passed groups of people at work. Again he noticed the absence of merriment, even of conversation. Here and there a worker lifted a gloomy face, casting a quick, searching look at Oyvind's. Always it was a woman and always she dropped her eyes in silent resignation as to the loss of a desire that was all-consuming.

He shuddered as he followed the hunchback — to face what? He had often doubted the existence of the Asa-gods and of the White Christ. Like the

rest, in order to protect life and limb, he had accepted Olaf's learning, and as the rest, tho he had little faith in any of the gods, he had continued in secret to make sacrificial offerings to Asa-Thor, to Odin, to Freya, to Frey. Now he folded his hands and prayed to the Holy Mother as Father Anselmo had taught him. If she could not protect him now, he was lost indeed.

They had reached the upper step of the terrace and stood on the wide marble floor, behind a second row of pillars that ran the entire length of the veranda. This they crossed and stopped before double doors, guarded by four men in the livery of royal service. Their uniform consisted of white woolen coats, grey breeches, fastened at the knees with gold chains, grey leg-coverings and low shoes, fastened with gold buckles. Their caps were made of green wool, ornamented with gold filigree. Their hair was long and black, their faces waxy white, their eyes black and filled with the gloom that characterized the people in Mokakala's kingdom.

They held aloft gleaming battle-axes. These they ceremoniously lowered while Oyvind, followed by the hunchback, passed thru the double doors into the ante-chamber.

This room extended along the entire front of the building and was of enormous length. The richly carved ceiling was held up by a colonnade of which the pillars were ornamented with gold and other precious metals. The chairs and divans were simi-

larly ornamented. It seemed to Oyvind that they possessed more gold than any other metal.

A wide door leading to a smaller room was screened by curtains woven of metals in which gold predominated. Here were other guards in livery, with their battle-axes. Oyvind and the hunchback passed thru. They were now in a small ante-chamber that led into an octagonal room occupying the first story of an octagonal tower, one of the two that flanked the central building. Here were four guards, but they were elf-maidens, and in their hands were white wands. These they held point down while they obsequiously parted the curtains for the two earthlings to pass thru.

Oyvind stood for a moment with bated breath. The room was lighted by hundreds of tiny flames, playing in little grooves, hewn in the marble that constituted the ceiling. The white floor was almost covered by a rug, woven of precious metals, while the eight walls were hung with similar material. There was only one piece of furniture in the room, a throne, which occupied one entire wall. The throne itself was fashioned of pure gold and was hung with curtains of crimson silk and wool, reaching from the canopy above and, on both sides, falling to the floor. Before the throne, scintillating in all the colors of the rainbow, lay a rug, woven of pure gold, set with precious stones. Ranged on both sides of the throne stood guards leaning on their battle-axes.

It was not the magnificence of the room nor the looks of the guards that took Oyvind's breath away. It was the appearance of one who sat on the throne. Mokakala was a woman, then. She who, with sceptre and crown, sat on the throne, was a woman. He looked back at the hunchback, but he lay sprawling like an enormous crab by the curtains thru which they had but now entered. Then he turned once more and looked at the queen.

He knew she was an earthling, tho the curse of the region lay heavy upon her. Nay, besides the subtle despair that lay upon the rest, her face indicated that she bore a sorrow, alien to the others. He was looking into the face of another, one of his own kind, who knew not song nor laughter, who had no hope for an ultimate readjustment of that which had gone wrong, and who, in addition to this, carried a sorrow so all-consuming that Oyvind forgot all else in the new pity that took possession of him.

Her eyes were blue as mountain-pools at sunset, and Oyvind almost wept at what he read in their sorrowful depths. Her vivid lips gave her face its only splash of color, her teeth were white and perfect. Taken all in all, she was a strikingly beautiful woman of thirty at most. Even while she was seated he knew she was tall and stately.

He was not surprised when she addressed him in his own language. Involuntarily he knelt and kissed her hand.

"I expected you," she said. Her voice was sweet, but it lacked a quality that should have spoken to him as from a sister. Here was a human being whose experience had been such as to shut her out of fellowship with Oyvind. He might well pity her, but thru her voice there would never come to him an answering throb of sympathy. He stood overawed in the speculation upon what cataclysm of pain could have overtaken this woman who, evidently, was the queen of the underearthlings. Her next words puzzled him:

"It was for you, then, that Mokakala opened the passage in the mountains?" she asked. Then she rose and with a motion of her hand invited him to follow thru a door leading to another ante-room.

This ante-room was long, extending across the front of the palace to the second octagonal tower. It was furnished with chairs and divans, covered with woolen rugs. Woolen rugs were on the floor, too. Four girls were keeping guard over the door leading to the octagonal room, and several others lounged about, but came to immediate position of obedient service at the entrance of the queen.

They were dressed in short, blue skirts, embroidered in gold and silver, white linen waists and tiny blue capes, which they wore over the left shoulder. The guards parted the curtains, and as Oyvind was about to follow the queen into the adjoining room he felt himself growing hot and cold by turns. There,

so close to him that he could have touched her, stood Launa, gazing at him with her burning eyes.

He could scarcely keep his thoughts collected, for he was still under her spell. Every nerve in him called loudly for her, and all else was forgotten. He still trembled from the shock of the unexpected meeting when he entered the second octagonal room.

This was an exact replica of the first, except that this one possessed no throne. Instead, a large chaise-lounge occupied the length of the wall. Here, among woolen shawls and feather pillows, sat the most unique figure Oyvind had ever seen. It was an old man whose hair was white as carded wool, and whose dead-white, parchment-like skin was crossed and recrossed with such myriad wrinkles as to give the impression that centuries must have passed over his head. His hands, lying idly in his lap, looked like gnarled old wood, and ended in long, claw-like nails. Everything about him spoke of incredible age, but his eyes were bright, suggesting a weird, uncanny life.

Oyvind cringed before those eyes. They were black and piercing, as heated steel, eager, hungry. In their depths lurked a subtle dread, as in those of an animal, trapped and at the mercy of an unknown power. Oyvind read ferocity and a certain eagerness which in an ordinary person would pass for hope, mingled with a dread so terrible in its intensity that it struck him with an instant chill.

The fearful eyes were measuring him for some-

thing, he knew not what. Oyvind's fate was in the hands of this fearful mannikin, this relic of a forgotten age! This was a creature of a foregone generation, who should have been buried, perhaps centuries ago.

"I have brought you to Mokakala, the king of the underearthlings," said the queen, and Oyvind knelt over the gnarled, claw-like hand the old man gave him. This, then, was Mokakala, whose name he had already heard several times during the short stay under the earth.

Mokakala spoke a few, feverish words in the language of his own people, which Oyvind could not understand. It was around him the conversation between Mokakala and the queen turned. He knew that from the close scrutiny under which he stood, from them both. Why had he not plunged into the tjern? That would have been preferable to this. Why had he not taken his course to Holmgaard, to Svithjord? Why had he not sailed with the expedition around Norvasund with the men who were now on their way to Jorsala? Why was he not somewhere else, anywhere but here? Mokakala was brief in whatever directions he gave. After a profound bow to the old relic, Oyvind followed the queen from the room, leaving Mokakala among his pillows.

Arrived in the ante-room, the queen led him to the left, down a long corridor. At the end of this was a large room which they entered. It was dimly lighted by jets of fire, enclosed by globes of ground

glass. The hangings of the room were made of white wool, as were also the rugs and blankets, spread over couches and chairs. Even the windows opening on the court were draped with cloth of white wool.

In an open fire-place at one end of the room burned a fire, giving a cozy warmth to the room. On the middle of the floor stood a child's crib. The queen led the way to that and, as she stopped beside the cradle, she dismissed the maids. Tenderly she turned the soft, white blanket away from the rosy face of a sleeping child:

"My son," she whispered.

The child, two or three years of age, was one of the most beautiful children Oyvind had ever seen. His pure, white face had a healthy flush about the cheeks and lips, his little hands were curled up like rose leaves beneath his chin, and his hair was a profusion of yellow curls.

They stood for a moment in silence, watching the sleeping child. Then, with the tender motions of a loving mother, she patted the blanket into shape, called the nurses back to their charge and led the way to another, smaller, more homelike room than the one with the throne.

Here she motioned Oyvind to a seat and took one opposite.

"Of course you must understand that Mokakala had something in view when he opened the passage for you," she began without any preliminaries. "In

all his reign he has permitted only four earthlings to enter his realm, each one to serve in his scheme of things. You are the fourth one of these. That you may understand what is required of you, I must tell you the story of his people.

"It is now a thousand years since they came here to live in the bowels of the earth. They came to fulfil a curse laid upon them by their God. At first the cavern was but small, but as the centuries rolled away each succeeding generation has enlarged it till now it would take you a week to reach its end."

"But all these lights, this fire, I can not understand!" cried Oyvind; "and the food for so many people, where does it come from? Being human, they must eat."

"They must eat at any rate," she returned, answering his last question first. "Outside of the mountains are large valleys, as yet inaccessible to the earthlings. Here they reap great fields of corn and cut hay for the winter. In the forest on the mountain side they keep numerous herds of cattle, and sheep and goats. They dare not remain under the stars after midnight, but they are so many that they easily accomplish their work during their allotted time.

"As for the lights, they are the same kind of fires that burn in many places of the North. When the mountain is being hollowed out the crevice allows the combustible air to escape, and the workmen

simply take their fire-irons from which a spark sets it burning. It thus serves two purposes. It gives warmth and light while it destroys the fumes that otherwise would kill all living beings.

"And the air?" asked Oyvind. "I observe that the air is very fresh here."

"It comes thru great openings in the mountain, led here by a secret method of tunneling. This is known only to a few who are initiated, perhaps to keep the underearthlings from escaping and polluting the earthlings with their presence. All I know about the system is that Mokakala has one of the shafts opened when he wants an earthling.

"I have now been given special permission to speak on a forbidden subject, that I may give you the information I am delegated to impart to you. I have received permission to speak of God, a privilege which in this subterranean region is denied us. Now I shall tell you how this came to pass.

"Mokakala's progenitors were Jews. On the day when the Master toiled up the steep path that leads to the top of Golgotha, crushed by the weight of his cross, Zorak with his family jeered at Him. He even spat upon the Savior's garments. For this Jehovah pronounced a curse upon Zorak and his descendants. He, with his wife and children, was taken into the North and thrust into the gloomy cavern under the mountain. Until a certain thing comes to pass they must stay here. Now, after almost a thousand years, there is a chance that, with the next

generation, the curse may be lifted. You can not understand what that means to Mokakala, to me!

"Until that deliverance comes they are still to remain here, without a God, without souls. You can never grasp the woe and desolation of that condition. Zorak was a wicked Jew, and his heart had been far from the Great Jehovah, but he lived with the privilege of calling upon Him. He had done so in the past, carelessly and selfishly, yet it filled a void with which he had not been fully acquainted till it was too late.

"More essential to the human heart even than the sunshine they say falls upon the earth, is God's listening ear. No human suffering, no desolation of despair is as great as that which is born from the denial of the privilege of addressing God. They were left here in the barren clefts of a mighty subterranean cavern without any life but that which they brought in their own bodies, no sunshine, and most terrible of all, no God. Mere human intellect can not grasp the fearsomeness of it. The human heart is fairly crushed beneath the horror of it! The depth of despair in the human heart that dares not claim God's fatherhood is too deep for finite minds to grasp. The loss of the human being who no longer dares to lift his face to the Infinite Source of his existence is too colossal for human mind to grasp.

"And that is not all. The Eternal Power that created these unfortunate people is far off. The Divine Ear is turned away, and but an empty echo

would send their supplications back upon themselves should they attempt a word of prayer. Neither you nor any other human being can fathom the eternal agony of these people with human bodies, human intellects, and an eternal repentance gnawing at their vitals as a worm in the heart of a flower. These people have no communication with their God, whose listening ear is turned away."

Oyvind sat in silence for a few moments after the queen had spoken. A sudden chilling fear came over him that reminded him of a day when suddenly he had come upon a precipice from which by a mere hairbreadth he had saved himself. It seemed to him now that every one of these people must have gone down just such an abyss and were forever living in the pain of mangled bodies and forlorn hopes.

"I catch a glimmer of your truth," he returned in a thick, unnatural voice. "I am afraid we of the earth, too, are culpable. We know but little of the White Christ. We worship Him in the churches, it is true, but it is because we are afraid of the priests with their penance and of Olaf. In secret we worship the Asa-gods and make sacrificial offerings. Twice in the spring we hold feasts and offer sacrifices to the Asas for a good season. In the fall of the year we have another. Then we supplicate the gods for a mild winter. As for me, I have not yet quite learned to believe in the White Christ. So, like the underearthlings, I, too, have been without a God!"

She shook her head. "Don't say such a thing!" she cried. "You do not understand me after all. Your belief in the Asas, crude and corrupted as it is, must be a feeble representation of the true God. It must have helped even to open the way for the White Christ."

"I can't understand how this can be," replied Oyvind with intense eagerness. "Our Asa-god belief we always have had in the North. Saga tells us it was brought with the very first of our kind into our land. I wish you were right in thinking it is the same, but I am afraid —"

"Yes," murmured the queen, "you have always had the God idea. In all the length and breadth of the world above there are no people that do not possess, in one form or another, the idea of a higher being. Among all God's creation there are no people who have lost the right to their souls, lost the right to their God, except Mokakala and his people."

"But I still don't see what good our pagan belief has done us if, as the priest says, the White Christ is the true God. In our Asa-worship there is nothing that brings us to the Savior," replied Oyvind anxiously.

"I have not the learning to say what good it has done you so far, but to me it seems that you Norsemen brought with you a germ of the true God-religion and that you have followed a gleam of light that will soon bring you into a full and living dawn."

"And the gleam you speak of, has it lived in our heathen worship?" asked Oyvind.

"When you Northmen are in utter trouble, in the agony of your soul, you call, not upon Thor nor Frey nor yet upon Odin. You call upon the All-father," she replied triumphantly. "You know not who He is nor what, you feel you need something more potent than the Asas, is it not so? Does it not indicate a gleam of light, illuminating what otherwise would have been an endless heathen night?"

"Is that all?" asked Oyvind, rather chagrined.

"No," she returned after a short pause. "Your far-going Vikings came in contact with the Christ idea in southern lands. I can not help thinking that they brought its influence back with them, unknowingly, as we might the odor of flowers in our garments. But that was not all. They were fond of mating with the dusky maidens of the warm lands who brought the belief in the White Christ and, with the milk in their breasts, gave it to the sucking babe."

Oyvind nodded. Gunlaug's mother must have been like that. "Then it is our own faith that has come to us with Olaf from the land of the Engles?" he asked.

"It is the faith of your race, such as they probably possessed it long ages before they reached the North," she replied, "also the faith of the women brought here from the South, wives to the Vikings."

"And since it must have belonged to our race and since it has been brought back here from time to time by God-fearing women who have become the mothers of men, why is our worship a corrupt heathen faith?" he asked gloomily. "Useless because it has never led us to the White Christ?"

"Because it was handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth," she replied. "It changed every time it was retold. Had you possessed books, it would not have been so. The women who come from the South have no books, in fact, they are too few and weak to exert any strong influence over many people. This new way is the only way. The learning that comes to you now comes firmly fixed in written records, such as they were made by those who in the Holy Land wandered with the Master. You see, being written, they have remained unchanged thru the years."

"But our religion was heathen and perverted. I don't see of what good it could have been," persisted Oyvind.

"You will if you compare yourself with these dreadful creatures that live within this mountain," she returned. "You have possessed the freedom of calling upon a Higher Power that you confess is above yourselves, and it has made you a nobler race than you otherwise could have been. Without it you would have been as a toddling infant far from home, beyond the comforting power of the parents. You have never been crushed under the conditions

so dreadful, the desolation so supreme as that which envelopes the human being who dares not mention God's Holy Name."

"How were their souls removed without their lives?" asked Oyvind suddenly.

"They were not removed," she replied. "They never had any, because there is nothing in their lives higher than themselves. It is for this they dare not laugh, dare not hope. Possessing the human body and the human intellect, they are reduced to the status of the brute. With their human attributes follow the knowledge of their defect. It is this that makes their unending punishment, their incessant hunger for the restoration of that which they have lost."

"Is there a possibility of their souls ever coming to them?" inquired Oyvind.

"There is one way, at least to their way of thinking, by which they may possess a tiny spark of eternal life, or you may call it soul, but, more correctly speaking, that will grow into a soul, and vicariously they may then come in for the blessings of prayers. That possibility comes when one of our maidens can entice an earthling into her presence and, in his weak moment, throw her fire-iron over him. It is believed that after this she, in a mystic way, lives in his soul and that she receives a small benefit of his prayers. Also should there ever exist a germal life, a life in which they were both represented, that would eventually, in a much shorter period, ripen into a soul for the mother.

"Because of this belief the elf-maidens are given two hours under every full moon when they are permitted to leave the mountain. They have three chances to throw their iron. If they fail on the third attempt they are lost. You will easily understand how eager they are to continue life, even in a dim, inadequate condition, when I tell you they do not even count the penalty of the consequences, which is death."

"How is that?" asked Oyvind, and she replied:

"It is written in Mokakala's book that none shall be born of mixed blood. The mother and the unborn must die together. You know, of course, what happens to the earthling who is thus, to a certain extent, changed from the human to the brute nature. You have undoubtedly known those who have been mountain-taken. They must always live under the curse, not even the elf-maiden's death removes that. It is written that every time there is a full moon he, too, becomes a mere human body without a soul and with only the instincts of a brute, a fit companion for the elf-maiden. You can not understand the horror of such people's position. I tell you this as a warning, for it is only by keeping away from the elf-maidens that you may fulfil Mokakala's hopes in you."

Oyvind felt his cheeks burn, and he lowered his eyes. Had she guessed his narrow escape from Launa? "What is there to fear?" he asked at last.

"Those who are pure in thoughts and deed need

not fear them," she replied, "but those others must be under the sharpest look-out, for over them the elf-maidens have full sway. If you are in any kind of danger from them, be on your guard! If one of them gets her fire-iron over you, then you're lost. If she fails in that but entices you into her presence, you suffer all the horrors of one who is mountain-taken, but you will be released at her death. Be careful, for if you are mountain-taken, not only will you be lost, but our hopes will be in vain."

"How can your hopes rest in me?" asked Oyvind.

"I will tell you," she replied. "I was only two years old when I was taken into Mokakala's kingdom. He opened the passage and sent a servant after me. Whose child I am, under what circumstances I came into being, I cannot say. I know that my mother dropped me into the tjern, and that her handmaid, in order that I should have a servant in the land of Hel, threw her son in with me. And so Mokakala received us, for it is written that he can have no earthling that is not destined to lose his life in Blackwater Tjern."

"And the boy?" It was a question.

"Is Hans, the hunchback," she replied. "He was not expected, so he fell to the bottom and received such injuries that he became a cripple. It is necessary that earthlings from time to time enter Mokakala's kingdom, but we can not use a cripple."

"Did you ever hear of the castles on the meadow?" asked Oyvind.

"They were of no use to the underearthlings," she replied harshly. "They were a hundred years before my time, but Mokakala knows about them. They were not suited to our purpose, for they were unclean and mated with the underearthlings. But since the marriage between the soulless and the human, in the sight of God, is an abomination, they all died. They, too, lost their souls in dire punishment, their human birth-right. All but the two lovers. They were pure, but they died before they reached the tjern."

"And the tjern?" questioned Oyvind, "we have a belief that when the wrong done the lovers is righted, the tjern will resume its pristine condition. Is it so?"

She shook her head. "The lovers have long gone to their rewards," she said. "That was not the wrong. It was the punishment for their abominations that struck the people of the meadow. That wrong will be righted with the coming of an earthling who has the strength of purpose to avoid the fire-irons of the under-earth maidens. When such a one comes and gives me three promises, which he bids fair to keep, then the conditions shall have been fulfilled; and to pay, Mokakala will change the tjern back into a meadow."

"You will understand the importance of these promises when I tell you that if they are kept, in its own time, the souls of Mokakala's subjects will return. The sign of the beast will pass. Laughter,

song, gladness, and hope will come to them. Mokakala and his people will then live under the stars, they will have the sunshine upon them. Once more will Zorak's people dare to call upon the living God, again Jehovah will turn to them a listening ear. Can you grasp it all?"

"It seems much to grasp," returned Oyvind, "but since so much depends upon one, like me for example, why are the elf-maidens permitted to endanger these hopes with the possibility of making him unfit?"

"You have some reason for asking such a question," admitted the queen. "But we must have a man with a character. Then, too, the elf-maidens do not know why you are here. All they know is to follow their instinct for securing even the faintest semblance of a life after this. Also a man, to serve us, must be of fine physique, of fine mentality, and devout. For this reason Hans was useless, a man whose downfall could be brought about by the elf-maidens is equally useless.

"Came one night and threw himself into the tjern, a young man. Him Mokakala rescued, and he became my husband. He was all that could be desired, and our stay together was wonderful. Even here the happiness of a perfect love was permitted. Not even in the heaven, promised to those who have souls, can one expect greater joy than was ours."

Then the clarified ecstasy which for a moment lighted up her face faded away, leaving her eyes

filled with that unnamable sorrow he had observed in her. After a slight pause she continued:

"He is no longer here. He left my babe and me! Once I had a hope he might return, but that is dead now."

"Is there a way by which he can come back?" asked Oyvind in surprise. "Surely, if he loves you he'll return."

"There is a way for him to return, and he loves me," she replied, "but I am afraid that life down here among the underearthlings must have come to seem like an abomination to him. He had been baptized and, because of that, Mokakala's realm had no hold over him. I can not reach him, for I am not baptized."

"May I ask you," ventured Oyvind timidly, "have you a soul?"

"Assuredly," she replied. "So has my baby and Hans. My husband was permitted to teach us about the White Christ, but he was not allowed to speak of Him to the underearthlings nor mention His Name anywhere except here in this room. No one dares come in here except those who have a soul, and I dare not speak of God anywhere but here."

"So that is why you know these things and talk as you do?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, simply, "that is the reason."

She sat for a moment in deep thought, as if in dread of the next step. If she'd only make haste and tell him what part he was to play in this strange

tragedy, enacted within the bowels of the mountain! How he wished the dreadful idea of jumping into the tjern had never occurred to him! His punishment came swift and terrible. Then she went on:

"As I was saying, Mokakala had something special in view when he had you taken into the mountain. He does not speak your tongue, so I am to negotiate. Think carefully, then answer me.

"You wish to wed Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller. Her father has promised you the maiden if, within three weeks from that time, or before she becomes the bride of Gunstein the Brave, the tjern shall resume its pristine condition. Only to Mokakala is this feat of transformation possible.

"If you promise three things he will fulfil the conditions under which you may become husband to the woman you love; if not, then she becomes the bride to a man fated to abuse her for a fault of which you are only too fully aware. Then to the elf-maidens will we give you, and, there is no fate too horrible for them to prepare for an earthling. Now, what do you say?"

Oyvind only shook his head and she went on:

"We have long observed you and Gunlaug. Mokakala felt that you were people thru whom he could complete his scheme. He was glad when he learned that you were denied the maiden, for an unhappy lover is apt to drown himself. If you could only be induced to end your days in Blackwater Tjern!

So he sent the elf-maidens to way-lay you in your sleep, out in the forest, and whisper the idea into your waking mind. It worked well, for you came to believe the only way you could serve Gunlaug was by dying. It was only a step to induce you to try the tjern.

"Mokakala has no power to restore life, so he sent Hans to keep you from drowning. He was able to bring you in here without your having plunged into the tjern. Of this he was so proud that he came to tell me and to prepare me for seeing you as dry as when you left the sandy beach of the tjern."

Oyvind's face turned red, for he remembered what had befallen while Hans had been from him. Then he asked her to name the three promises.

He laughed when she told him. They seemed so remote, so impossible of fulfilment. Surely it was safe to make them.

They seemed more important, however, when a few minutes later he stood in the court-yard, waiting for Hans to take him back to the tjern. He felt sure that Mokakala could restore the tjern, and if so, then he must keep the three promises. He shivered as he stood there. The thoughtless words he had spoken to Gunlaug, in the shadow of the great pine, came back to him with a new and sinister meaning.

He would sell his soul to the Christians' Devil, he had told her. Was this not what he had done? What was the dreadful thing which they had learned to fear as the Christians' Devil if he were not ex-

emplified in the person of Mokakala and his iniquitous followers? These creatures among whom lived so much that was unclean.

It was not the Christians' Devil alone, but hundreds of underearthling fiends that were fighting for the last shred of his cringing soul. How could he go back and marry Gunlaug, how could he keep his promises? Death was simpler. Why not seek Launa; in that, at least, lay death. It would be better than this other, that he had promised, now that he saw it in all its hideousness. The Christians' roaring Hell awaited him anyway, why not seek Launa and let her bring him forgetfulness, at least for a time?

Launa had no soul, was marked by the beast, but he? In a generation, a thousand years before her birth, Launa's birthright had been lost. He, like the man in the Holy Book, had sold his, not for a mess of pottage but for a promise of a few years' questionable happiness. Came the question: Would it be happiness after all, with this worm gnawing at his vitals, which, he knew, would never leave him in peace, by night or by day, would never allow him to forget? Something had already entered his soul and made him afraid to face his kind. Almost unconsciously he looked about him for Launa.

As an answer to his unholy wish Launa appeared. Again she beckoned him to follow her into the gloomy region beyond the lights. Again he held her in his arms. Once more she brought from her

bosom the fire-iron which should forever bind him to her, but he was on the look-out, and quick as a flash he gripped her wrists. With a sudden outward swing of the hand he sent it from him, and a tinkling sound came back to them from where it fell among the rocks. Oyvind laughed, for he had disarmed the elf-maiden and was no longer afraid of her power. But her breath continued to fan his cheeks, her hands still clasped him. When Hans, a few minutes later, arrived to take Oyvind back to the tjern, he uttered maledictions against the elf-woman and against the man.

Oyvind shivered as if he had come to himself after a horrible dream. He knew it now. Something of his soul had left him and something of the brute had taken its place. He recalled what the queen had told him and recoiled in horror at what he had become.

Had he been only a few hours within the mountain, or had it been a century since he emerged from the tunnel? He almost hoped it was a century, then he would not need to face those he had left behind. Was he, too, marked by the beast? he wondered. Would he, too, be hated and feared as those who were mountain-taken? For it was only by chance, and not to his credit, that Launa had failed to throw her fire-iron over him.

CHAPTER XVII

CLEAR and fresh as a day in dreamland rose the wedding morning. Below the holdings of Thorold the Strong lay the valley, vivid in its greenery of wood and meadow. Here and there the meandering river glinted between clumps of trees and clusters of buildings. The farmsteads, with their houses circling the tun, dotted the valley, the small, well-tilled fields stretched out along both sides of the stream which, in its immediate journey from the mountains, danced in wild water-falls, played among the boulders as it descended among the foot-hills and moved on sedately in its winding course.

Thorold's gaard lay on a wide, shelf-like plain, from which the land fell gently to the level bottom of the valley. Back of the buildings lay the forest, and back of the forest stood the mountains. To the left, at the very edge of Thorold's thun, the land dropped down in fantastic rifts and crags to the sandy edge of Blackwater Tjern, occupying a great, bowl-like depression among the mountains. To the east stretched the fertile field-land of Thorold the Strong.

To the northwest, one of a series of mountain-

peaks, stood the highest one of them all, white and dazzling with its crown of eternal snow. Farther down, the mountain was grayish green. That was because it was covered with the mountain-fern, endlessly trying to reach the top. Still farther down the color was fresher, for here the fern was accompanied by the juniper. Below, in a struggling procession, came the spruce, the pine, and here and there a venturesome clump of birch. At the bottom grew the pines, tall and majestic, mixed with more wide-spreading spruce and, where the forest opened, there were the aspen and the mountain ash, notably contrasted by the slender, white-stemmed birches, whose delicate, fluttering foliage reflected the sunbeams that danced on the shining surface of their little round leaves.

Tall and dark stood the mountain as it had stood when the earth was young. Hard and stern it stood, preserving its secret even from the wonderful creative morn. But the little mountain-fern and the juniper whispered to him. Always they whispered of the sunny valleys, of the fragrant flowers, of the sunshine that one day should melt the snow on his top. Then should come their chance to take their delicate, green covering to his very crest.

They talked to each other, too, the juniper and the mountain-fern. They wanted to see who would be the first to reach the top, they or the pine or the pretty birches. Oh, the mountain-fern and the juniper would be the first, they knew that. Always, since

time immemorial, the ferns had been first, always climbing, climbing, clothing the naked rocks. Sometimes, forsooth, they had been compelled to give up for a spell, but never had they made a real retreat. Always they had fought on till they made good what they had lost, then they had moved upward an added jot.

Oh, there had been times, especially in the cold nights, when it seemed impossible they could keep their hold. When it seemed their very roots would crinkle up beneath them and they would lose their grip. Then it was well to have in mind the joy that should be theirs with the first peep over the top!

Oh, yes, some day they would perch right on the highest pinnacle and look over! Of course, the juniper, the trees, would follow the fern. They always did, but what of it? Wasn't the fern going to take the first peep?

Down below the forest was silent, save for a faint murmur. Some would think it was the wind, rustling thru the tree tops. But those who knew the trees were sure the sound came from their pithy hearts. They were mourning the passing of the old days. The old order was changing, they would soon be of the past as the old gods, the singing, the feasting. The time was coming when only the oldest monarchs of the forest would remember the Asas, when the tales of the Vikings, who carried the terror of the North into the remotest corner of the earth, would be a mere saga, told at dusk. No wonder the

trees were sad. They were singing a solemn requiem to the passing greatness of the Northland.

With the Asas, the earl-kings and the renowned Viking, would also pass the glory of the trees. No one would mark their beauty nor their majesty, for now no one would worship within their shades. Now shrines, made by the hands of men, stood along the road-side. There was nothing left to them but the mountain. And the mountain was unfriendly, uncommunicative. He stood there with snow on his head, iron in his bosom, brooding, ever brooding over something, the oldest tree among them knew not what.

But the birches, standing like a bevy of school-girls, being young, were cheerful. The birds sang among their leaves, the busy insects fluttered about them in the air, making pretty splashes of color. At their feet the little plants were gathering substance and color for the lovely flowers and the parts that were to supply people's needs. The graceful birches loved all things beautiful, but they loved the birds best of all. They fairly trembled, in their happiness, when a lark or a nightingale or even a woodpecker built its nest among their branches. They always guarded the secret of the tiny home so carefully, and the joyful song of the occupants always found an echo in their hearts.

But on this wedding morning even the birches were a little sad. They were not grieving over the old order. Two things bothered them: Days had

passed since they had seen Gunlaug running towards the trysting-place, and it had been equally long since they had heard her clear yodel in answer to Oyvind. The little leaves had always quivered with every vibration of the strings, with every tone of the girl's voice. A sigh went thru their tops as they whispered among themselves of the love they had witnessed while they trembled for its safety.

The midsummer sun rises early in the far North, but no sooner had it risen than smoke began belching out of the chimneys on Thorold's gaard. Already men and maids were stirring and fires were blazing for the use of the cooks. There was still much to be done ere they were ready to receive the guests coming from far and near.

The day was not far advanced when they began to arrive. Rich and poor, high and lowly, all were received with cordiality. Was not this the "honor-day" of Thorold's daughter? Every guest was treated to a drink of ale, as he entered the tun, and small honey-cakes were passed around by the girls and matrons, ever anxious to perform their office.

Every road leading to Thorold's holdings was alive with people. Some walked along the dusty highway, some rode horseback, and others drove in the two-wheeled cart, drawn by the little, sure-footed mountain horse. They were happy too, and the distant mountains sent back the echo of their laughter and gay repartee, their merry quips and jests, their hearty songs. And why should they not

be happy? Thorold was rich, and there would be a quantity of good things to eat and to drink. There would be sport, too, and music, and it would last, without any interruption, for a week.

It was a motly crowd, this one, on the way to the wedding of Thorold's daughter. Among them were free-lances from the king's court, musicians, some of them carrying harps, some lutes, and others various instruments seldom seen in the North. There were big, brawny men from the land of the Scots, smaller men with swarthy skin, talking in a soft tongue no one could understand. These were men who had followed the homing prow of the Viking-boats from far-away ports on their way to Jorsala. These were jugglers and fortune-tellers, hoping to reap a bounteous harvest. There were Gypsies too, with their fantastic head-dress, their cheap jewelry and their tiny tambourines. They would be well treated, for this day demanded even greater hospitality than ever, a quality never wanting in the North.

These were few in number, compared with the bonde-folk, like Thorold himself. There were men of high standing among them, too, for Thorold was of kingly blood, the great-grandson of Harald Haarfagre. The men from Olaf's court were dressed in fine, outlandish garments, plumes in their hats, lace at their throats and wrists, with fancy ornaments and bright colors. The bønder were dressed in their best — dark breeches fastened at the knees with silver buckles, round, short jackets, with double rows

of silver buttons, and little, round caps. The legs were wound with woolen cloth, and on the feet were low shoes, which on the well-dressed men were buckled with silver.

The women wore short, black skirts with small, black jackets and white sleeves and bosom. On their heads were fantastically arranged white linen kerchiefs, and on their breast the sylje, made from silver, except in the case of the very rich, who had them made from beaten gold. They wore grey, woolen leg-coverings, fastened below the knee with woven strips of gay-colored wool. On their feet were low shoes, like those of the men, fastened with buckles of silver or brass.

At her side each women carried a small bundle. It contained a little neat-foot oil for dressing wounds, long strips of white linen, and — to meet the supreme contingency — her husband's shroud. A thousand years ago times were gay in the Northland. Amid the feasting and music, the merry dance and the smiles of the rosy-faced girls, a Northman's blood was apt to run fast. The head was apt to turn hot, and his sheath-knife never sat tight at his hip. It was best to be prepared for the most serious emergency.

CHAPTER XVIII

OUT in the tun Thorold was busy receiving his guests. His attentions were divided between directing his men to take the horses and in keeping an eye on the maids that they let no one escape the flowing bowl, the trenchers piled high with cakes. That would be a shame he never could suffer.

"Skaal, Thorold, skald, for your pretty daughter!" said Guthorm Halsen from Skallet, draining the wooden bowl Alfhild gave him. "But was there no young blood in the valley to bid the maiden fair, that you should wed her to a man whose heart is burnt out, whose pate is bald, and whose years place him with such old salts as you and I?"

Guthorm lived still higher up than Thorold. For twenty years he had lived alone, ever since one night when he had returned from a long stay abroad, some said in Viking-raid, some said from a home somewhere beyond the mountains, far to the east. No one knew much about Guthorm, and no one asked him any questions. It was strange, too, for he was the kindest old fellow in all of Lesje. He knew more of the night-folk, the underearthlings, and the nisser than any other man who lived in the valley.

This had given him a peculiar place among his neighbors, who half feared him, half looked to him for aid in the case of an evil eye, or in a case of being mountain-taken.

Thorold took Guthorm's question with a short laugh:

"In sooth there was," he replied, "and he bade me fair for the lass in an open and manly way. Oyvind the Skald possesses a tiny gaard, but nothing to set forth to Thorold's daughter. For this reason I told him to see about getting Blackwater Tjern changed back to meadow. This, then, should be his patrimony, and he might come to bid me fair for my daughter's hand."

"Oyvind the Skald is a fine young carl, Thorold," replied Guthorm gravely. "Methinks she could go far and then do worse than taking him."

"Well, he has my word," returned Thorold laughing, with a nod towards the cliff, hiding the tjern from view. "There is still time for him to perform the little miracle. Then he can lead my daughter to the altar. Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller, never breaks his word."

"Be not too sure it won't come to pass, friend Thorold," cautioned Guthorm. "We live in wondrous times. May I ask if Oyvind is here this day?"

"Not I have time to search for the knave," replied Thorold, "nor have I time to see how fares the tjern. Perhaps your young friend is bridging it. But I must away, there are others who would talk

to Thorold on this day." With a rumbling laugh he walked away and was soon engaged in jolly badinage with some of the newcomers.

Guthorm stood for a few moments where Thorold had left him, a far-away look in his eyes. His thoughts were with the young skald. In what wretched corner was he eating out his heart that sunny day? It recalled to him the cold winter night when he had seen a woman take a small child out from the warm, lighted guest-hall, out from the music, the laughter, and the happy crowds of people, into a cold, lonely, and dark out-building. As he did that night, he vowed he'd find Oyvind and bring him back into his kingdom, even tho he should miss the very ceremony at the church.

CHAPTER XIX

GUNLAUG was in her chamber with Gunhild and Ylve, arranging her bridal finery. The crimson gown with its accessories had been adjusted, now Ylve was struggling with the tiny shoes. Gunhild brought the crown and placed it on the heavy braids of Gunlaug's hair. The bitter tears rolled down her cheeks, for this was the mother's privilege. If only Gunlaug had possessed a mother, perhaps then there had not been so much heartache on this day that should have been so bright and happy. There would then not have been such unending regret.

Gunlaug found a few minutes alone before she was expected to leave her room. She sank down on a bench and sobbed till her whole body shook with the violence of her emotions. All thru the night, after she parted from Oyvind, she had lain awake, her eyes in a trance-like stare, fastened on the little dim oblong of her window. Nevermore would she see Oyvind, nevermore would she know the sweetness of his companionship, nevermore would she listen to the soothing melodies that he coaxed from his harp. Alas, like their young

lives, the harp lay broken where he had tossed it, down on the ledge of the cliff!

Then she saw the sun rise. Would its bright rays reach down to the slimy depths where Oyvind lay? Would the tjern give evidence of again having closed over a living, breathing form? Had ever any human being felt as guilty as she did now while looking at the wonders of sunrise? She was the one who had arranged the tryst, she had been the least circumspect. Oh, if she had held him to a sensible friendship, then all would have been well, for prosaic old age would have made them quite satisfied with these crumbs from love's feast. Now it was too late. Now Oyvind was dead in the tjern, and she was alone with her grief and remorse.

A sudden turmoil in the tun told her that the bridegroom was approaching. The musicians tuned their harps, the waiting-maids and serving-women crowded about, eagerly jostling into line, ready to serve the man of the hour, with his following.

The harpers were marching towards the high-road, whence came the bridegroom, whom they must precede into the tun. The women with their offerings were waiting. All was joy and sparkling with anticipation, all were happy but Alfhild. She was pale and her eyes were puffed with weeping; but why should she care? Few, on such a day, would observe her, a half-old spinster.

CHAPTER XX

THOROLD was standing among the men, ready to welcome his future maag, when Guthorm came running towards him as fast as his ageing legs could move. He grasped Thorold's arm and, to the astonishment of the lookers-on, drew him at full speed towards the cliff that rose from the tjern.

Thorold made one desperate attempt to withdraw from the man's grip, but one look into his face caused him to follow without a word. Something out of the ordinary was afoot.

"What's the matter?" he panted.

"Guess you'll have to change the bridegroom," replied Guthorm, scarcely above a whisper. "Guess Gunstein is not the man who will wed your daughter this day!" By this time they stood above what had been the tjern, and Guthorm spreads his hands to indicate its whole surface.

Thorold fell to his knees, mumbling prayers to Odin, to Thor and, from habit, making the sign of the cross. Instead of the black waters there lay beneath him a billowing, green meadow, smiling under the dazzling sun! Such must have been the new earth as it sprang, a masterpiece, from the Maker's hand.

Thorold clumsily rose from his feet, his rugged body shaking as the sturdy pine beneath the onslaught of the stern north-wind. "What does it mean?" he asked, dazedly. "I don't understand."

"It is as you see," replied Guthorm. "This day the tjern has returned to its pristine condition. Instead of the sullen water you see a smiling, green meadow. It means that Oyvind the Skald and not Gunstein the Strong leads Gunlaug to the altar, or else he breaks his word, Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller."

"Never was it said of Thorold that he broke faith," declared Thorold huskily, "I see Gunstein has arrived, but where is the young knave?"

"If you mean Oyvind the Skald, he lies down there," replied Guthorm with sudden dignity. "Down there, under the cliff where before was the rim of the tjern. He is waiting for me to bring him your answer."

"There can be only one," said Thorold in the same husky tone that seemed to have become characteristic of him. "The feast must be changed from a wedding to that of a betrothal."

"That is so," agreed Guthorm, "there must be at least three weeks for the bans."

It was not an easy thing for Thorold to inform Gunstein that the wedding could not take place. This was such an unheard of thing that he was sure it had never happened in all of Northland, perhaps not in all the world! And yet he felt a sudden light-

ness of heart. It had not escaped him that Gunlaug was unhappy, and it was well that, without dishonor, he could withdraw his consent to the marriage. The tjern had given place to the meadow, as every one could see. Surely he could not fare right into the very teeth of the gods. And Guthorm, if necessary, could testify that he in this event had promised his daughter to the skald.

Thorold's first care was to stop the music. Then Gunstein knew at once that something had gone wrong. Gunlaug was dead, nothing less could warrant any change in the plans. He was intensely alarmed when he alighted from his horse to answer Thorold's greeting.

"Good word, Gunstein, thanks for when last we met," he said, still in the husky voice.

"Good word, Thorold, and thanks in a like manner," returned Gunstein, taking the proffered hand. "What is it that now flies in the air? Methinks something has befallen your house, Thorold!"

Thorold shook his head. "Yes, so, yes, so, it has," said he. "Strange things have come to pass in our day. So strange you'll never believe them till your own eyes tell you the truth. Some weeks ago, Oyvind the Skald bade me fair for my daughter. I promised if Blackwater Tjern assumed its pristine condition before she became the wife to you, he should be her bridegroom. Now the tjern lies there a solid, green meadow. I must keep my word. Is it good word again, Gunstein?"

While Thorold was speaking, the hot blood rose to Gunstein's face. His eyes flashed and the veins in his forehead became rigid and knotted. Slowly his right hand stole to the knife at his hip. The guests gathered around the two men. It looked as if blood would be spilled early in the day.

"What old wives' tale is this?" asked Gunstein wrathfully, knife in hand, approaching Thorold. "Dost expect me to believe — —"

Then the people round about felt sure the wedding would be changed to a funeral, for Thorold turned to his assailant with a snarl of speechless fury. That any one should voice a doubt of his word!

"By the gods, Gunstein!" he cried, baring his knife. "Take these words back! Wouldst call me a liar? Take them back, man, take them back, or by all I hold dear, I shall cut out your heart and give it to the Asas as an offering for a good season. I shall pay no fine for your blood, either! Take back your words!" His voice was getting hoarser with each utterance now, while from his rage his lips were flecked with foam. "Do you hear, Gunstein? I shall give your carcass to the carrion crows and I shall pay no fine for your bane!"

Gunstein stood face to face with the angry man, drawn knife in hand, scarcely more rational than Thorold. The next moment would bring the bane of one.

Among the onlookers there was one who, frozen

with horror, had read the berserker rage in the men's faces and knew that one of them, at least, would pay the extreme penalty. It was Alfhild, daughter of Oystein Skule. She must do something, or this would become a funeral!

Without any more ado she sprang between the enraged men, her bowl held aloft.

"Drink, then, Gunstein!" she cried, "Tell Thorold you never called him a liar. Tell him so! Tell him, Gunstein, then drink!"

Her cheeks were not pale now, her eyes no longer lustreless. Her cheeks glowed with the roses of twenty, her eyes were as two pools of shining light. The years had rolled away, and Gunstein saw once more the girl he had always admired even in the old days when he was a young man.

With slow deliberation he replaced the knife in its sheath, then he turned to Thorold, who followed his example:

"She is right," he cried, giving Thorold his hand, "I did not mean to say that you lied, I never said it, really did not! Then you drew the knife, — well, Gunstein the Brave never feared the gleam of the naked blade, but, is it good word again?"

The old men shook hands with good-natured raillery, then Gunstein turned to Alfhild and took the proffered bowl. When he handed it back he accompanied it with a royal kiss on her still red cheek, while the whole company, who had gathered to see the fight, broke into wild laughter.

"Let them laugh, lass!" cried Gunstein. "When this tangle is unravelled I shall look you up and bid you fair as is proper in an honest carl. You shall see that he laughs best who laughs last!"

Alfhild looked frightened now and would have hidden behind the women, but Gunstein caught her by the hand and continued, regardless of who might listen:

"You are far more to my liking than a young wench, not too old to be my daughter, anyway! May the Christians' Devil fly away with me for the oaf I've been till this day!"

Now that the guests had discovered that something extraordinary had happened, a wild stampede followed to the edge of the cliffs above the tjern.

CHAPTER XXI

THOROLD did not return to the cliff at once. He hastened to Gunlaug's building to tell her the news.

She sat as one stunned, "Blackwater Tjern!" she mumbled, "how can it be?"

"No one knows, my child," he replied, "but strange things happen in our day. I promised Oyvind, in the event of this, that he should have the privilege of bidding you fair, so now, if you want him, he is your man."

"But Oyvind is dead!" faltered Gunlaug.

"Not dead," replied her father. "He has but gone to make himself tidy. Soon he returns on his own beast, with his carls, as it behooves a man, on such an errand. Then he bids you fair as a free-born carl should. This, then, becomes a betrothal feast, not a wedding."

Gunlaug stepped to the open door. There, fringing the edge of the cliff, stood the guests, talking and gesticulating. She knew by their attitude, however, that they spoke in whispers and as if fear was upon them. Over across the tun, towards the north, she saw Oyvind and Guthorm. They were mounted on Thorold's horses and slowly rode out of the tun.

There was something in Oyvind's appearance that frightened her. His face was deadly white, his eyes were glazed over, as if he were in a trance, and he trembled so he could scarcely sit in the saddle. What had happened to him? Had he died down there in the tjern and, all these things, were they but a delusion? Was it only an apparition she saw, in Oyvind's form? Anything was possible after the tjern had been changed into a meadow!

Suddenly an icy hand seemed to grip her heart. She remembered the words Oyvind uttered in the wedge-shaped shadow of the pine. Everything connected with Oyvind seemed filled with a sinister meaning. What dreadful temptations had met him that night, after she left him, in the gloom and loneliness of the night? Had he sold his soul to the Christians' Devil? She would not let her father know her fear. With a cheerful smile she turned to him and thanked him. Clumsily he stroked her hair, under the silver crown. He was glad his little girl was going to be made happy.

"We are so clumsy in fixing things for others," he said, "now everything will be well."

Gunlaug's eyes filled with tears. She felt she had misunderstood her father. He had always had a kind heart and had wished only her happiness. How she wished she had understood him earlier in life!

"Come," she called to Gunhild, "help me remove the bridal dress; this is to be a betrothal-feast now."

Her cousin, who had observed Gunlaug's fear when she looked at Oyvind, was glad to see her throw it off and entered gladly into her lighter spirit.

"We'll have to prepare a new wedding," she clattered. "It is a fine thing that everybody, from far and near, are here this day, else it would be a seven year wonder to have the bans read first for you and Gunstein, then for you and Oyvind. The likes of that has never been heard in the whole of Olaf's kingdom."

CHAPTER XXII

DRESSED in the gown she wore the day when she met Gunstein to pledge her troth, stood Gunlaug, with Gunhild at her side, looking at the meadow that occupied the mountain-bowl. Every faculty but the power of sight seemed to have left her. She possessed no volition, no fear, no joy in the miracle that had been performed. She simply stood there, looking at the waving grass, where last night, reflecting the heavens, had lain the tjern, black and sullen.

She had feared that the people would stare, perhaps make remarks. Now she cared not, neither did they observe her. They stood together, huddled in small groups, whispering with awe-stricken faces of the miracle that had been performed in their midst.

Some supernatural power had been at work. Odin, perhaps, or the White Christ. Perhaps Freya had performed the miracle. It had always been known among them that Freya sympathized with unfortunate lovers. But if so, then, why had she not taken a hand earlier? They all knew unhappy lovers; yet, till now, no supernatral help had come to them. At the last Thing they had, in order to

safe-guard life and limb, promised to accept the White Christ, but in secret they had always sacrificed to the old gods. Was it for this that the Asas had restored the meadow? Was it a sign that the old gods were pleased with them? Who knew these things? Who could know?

These were the questions every one was asking either of his neighbor or of his own heart. Like the others, Gunlaug was busy finding an answer to them.

Coming down the wide road, leading thru the gap to the meadow that had been the tjern, they saw a strange group.

"They are the priest and the haut-boys," said Ylve, who had just come down from the top of the cliffs. "Thorold is afraid the underearthlings have had something to do with the transformation of the tjern, so he has asked Father Anselmo to bless the land and withdraw it forever from their power."

"They think, then, that the underearthlings have had something to do with it?" asked Gunlaug eagerly. She hoped they had. She was much less afraid of the underearthlings than of the Christians' Devil.

"Who knows?" remarked Gunhild. We live in an age of transition. All things are new. We know nothing of the White Christ, we know nothing of the Christians' Devil!"

Gunlaug's face turned ashen. "Do you think the Christians' Devil could have had anything to do with it?" she asked with trembling lips.

Gunhild smiled. "Not if we are to believe the good Father Anselmo," she replied. "According to all I hear he is not apt to bring good to any one."

Now the crowd opened to admit the priest and the haut-boys.

Father Anselmo came up to where Thorold and his daughter stood.

"Good word, Thorold," said the priest, taking him by the hand. "May the Holy Mother and all the Saints bless thee and keep thee with thy house! Strange things have this day befallen thee and thine."

"Very strange, holy father," replied Thorold. "But we look to you to help us. As you see, the tjern has been transformed, but by whose agency, I know not. If it is to be of service to mankind it must be made safe, and so I sent for you that you may sprinkle the ground with holy water and thus make it safe under foot. We look to you to bless it, so it will bring forth wholesome fruit and grain, too, and not fulsome poisons."

It was a long speech for Thorold, who was more at home driving his men or using the terse language of the long-boat than in the polished speech of those who converse with men of learning. He had been stirred to the depths of his nature, and this had loosened his tongue. He had decided, too, that if the priest could not help here, he'd have an excellent excuse for not adhering too closely to the new tenets of faith.

Now began a scramble for the shore of what had been the beach of the tjern, by those who had remained on the cliffs. Then, standing in solemn rows, the men removed their hats and the service began. Father Anselmo, the haut-boys swinging a censer, chanted a Kyrie. Then, after a lengthy prayer, he took up a piece of clod and blessed it, then he sprinkled it with holy water. After this he stretched out his arms in a gesture including the entire surface of the tjern and invoked the blessings of the Christ and all the Saints, praying that it might become safe under foot, that it might produce wholesome food for man and beast.

After pronouncing a benedicite over the bowed heads of the awe-stricken people, he walked boldly out on the wold, while one after another of the guests, haltingly, but with more bravery at every step, followed. They looked back, but no water came bubbling up in their steps. Evidently the ground was solid beneath their feet. One doubting Thomas dug a hole in the soft, black earth and found it firm. It was a wonder what they could do, the servants of the White Christ.

CHAPTER XXIII

AS it behooves a man about to bid a maiden fair, Oyvind returned on his own horse, with his own carls. He had urged his aunt to accompany him, too, but in vain.

"Wait till the day you are wed, boy," she told him, tears running down her cheeks, for during the days Oyvind had been so unhappy she had learned that she loved him with a tenderness of which she had been unaware.

It was two and twenty years ago now since she had carried him across the mountains in her apron. He had been a tiny infant then, and she had always cared for him. A small hut under the mountain had given her shelter, and it had always been a marvel to the neighbors the way she had forged ahead. In some way she found means to build a good little house and appropriate outbuildings. Then she gradually acquired the possession of two cows and a respectable flock of goats and sheep. But this was not all. She had been able to hire men who cleared enough land so she raised her needed corn and cut the hay for her winter use.

True, his aunt had always been a good worker, always securing the best pay for her labor, but even

that failed to explain her success. Oyvind had always been well-clad and well-fed. Not only that, but his aunt could read and she taught him the art from a book she had brought with her in the apron beside the babe. It was said to have been a testament taken into the North by St. Ansgar himself, that Oyvind's aunt came from the land of the Danes, lying far to the south and over the sea. But it was only a surmise, and on this question, as well as on all others, she kept her own council.

Long before Oyvind had become a man the people of Lesje had accepted him and his aunt, without any questions, as one of themselves. Her willing hands and dependability made a big place for her, and as he grew into manhood, Oyvind's harp made a way for him into people's hearts.

The guests stood gathered in groups, discussing this thing that had befallen them that day, when Thorold beckoned to Oyvind.

"I suppose you don't know how this strange thing came to pass," he said, as they walked down to the cliff, "neither do I ask any questions. I am not satisfied with that ceremony, tho it is good as far as it went. Methinks the old gods expect to look after a Viking and a Viking's daughter, I want them to have a share in this."

Oyvind nodded and they clambered down the cliff till they stood on the sandy line that rimmed the meadow. Thorold spoke again:

"Let us invoke the aid of the Asa-gods," he said.

Then he lifted his voice and asked the aid of Odin, of Thor, of Frey, and of Freya, who is credited with having in hand the most intimate affairs of men. Then he ended by asking the blessings of the All-father, the great spirit who ruled over all and who was neither Odin nor Thor nor any of the other gods to whom they gave a name. It was seldom the old Vikings felt any occasion sufficiently pressing to call upon the All-father.

The prayers concluded, Thorold turned to Oyvind and gave him his fire-iron.

"Since this is your property," he said, "there is none nearer to do what must next be done. Take this and throw it till you have thrown it across the entire meadow. That done, neither underearthlings, nor field-folk, nor nøkken, who lives in the waterfalls, can harm your holdings nor turn them back into water. But beware you don't lose the iron!"

Oyvind did as he was told. When Thorold received the iron again he went on with his instructions:

"Tonight, when all is still, I shall find my fattest goat and, on the sacrificial stone, I shall offer her to the Asas. Thorold is too old now to give up the ancient gods, but this time is the last when I shall intercede with them for your happiness and for the house you are about to set. Therefore take you your fattest goat, as well, and follow my example. Offer the best in your flock to the Asas."

Then they clasped hands. It was with a new feeling of brotherhood they walked to the edge of

the meadow into the gap. Here they proceeded along the winding path till they reached Thorold's tun. In the guest-hall were drinking and much talk. The torches had been lighted and the feast was spread. They had not been missed.

CHAPTER XXIV

A STIFF bowl of mead gave Oyvind back some of his vigor, and with proud bearing he escorted Gunlaug to the guest-hall. Here loud cries of acclaim greeted them. Preparations were on for seating the guests. The tables fairly groaned under the trenchers of meat and bread and cakes, under the great bowls that stood in two regular rows along each side of the table. The conversation was slack. Everybody was standing, silently hoping to be among the first to be asked to table.

Followed by the young couple and Gunhild, Thorold strode majestically to the high-seat, where they stood waiting for the guests, whom the maids, with much labor, managed to bring to their places at table. Gunstein occupied the place next to Oyvind, and opposite, no longer a serving-woman, sat Alfhild.

"Good word, Gunstein," said Thorold, giving him his hand, "I look to you to explain the situation, so none of our friends can misunderstand us this day."

Gunstein took a sip of ale, rose to his feet, cleared his throat, then began:

"Good word, my friends! You came here to see, that is to witness quite a different ceremony, but,

hm, hm, all things considered, all things are for the best. Hm, hm. Yes, it is so. I have found, for a long time, that is, hm, hm, I have found that a man's mate should not be too far from him in point of years. Hm, hm. He is apt to like the rosy cheeks, hm, hm, the bright eyes, but he forgets, hm, forgets that his, that is, hm, hm, that he is faded, and, hm, hm, he is not apt to be much interesting, hm hm, to a girl of twenty.

"Now I have, hm, hm, found a mate quite suited to me in every way, hm, hm, and we'll let the young mate together as the gods, hm, hm, as the dear Lord intended they should, hm, hm. Not that Alfhild, daughter of Oystein Skule, is old, right is she, just right for me, a man, hm, hm, in my best years. Yes, that's it, hm, hm. So this is a double feast, hm, hm, the betrothal of Oyvind the Skald, hm, hm, and Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller, hm, hm, yes. And also of Gunstein, called the Brave, and, hm, hm, Alfhild, daughter of Oystein Skule, hm, hm. Good word again, friends, and skaal, shame on him who doesn't drink, hm, hm!"

Furiously mopping his pink face and bald pate, Gunstein seated himself, amid the merry uproar from the guests, as they raised their drinking-horns and shouted their approval.

Then Thorold rose and with proper show of dignity proposed another skaal for the two couples. Needless to relate, the skaal was drunk. The North-

men had been true neither to their nature nor their traditions had they refused.

With rosy cheeks and shining eyes Gunlaug and Oyvind sat together. How wonderfully everything had turned out for them! Gunlaug made a little prayer to the White Christ and to his Holy Mother. Then she made a half-hearted apology to Freya. Oh, could she but know whence came her aid!

The evening passed merrily with music, singing, wrestling, and the many sports, dear to the Northman's heart. Then the candles were lighted in the reception-hall and the dance began. It was the same hall, the same scene almost, from which they had stolen to their first tryst, yet, how different! Instead of Oyvind playing for the old men, there were Attar Svarte and Sigvat Skald. Instead of Gunstein drinking with the older men, he was now dancing with the young maidens.

Instead of the roaring fires on the hearth there were banks of leaves and flowers, branches of the spruce, the pine, the birch and the mountain ash. Instead of finding it necessary to sneak away they could now walk out boldly, side by side, for they were "promised" and no one dared gossip.

"I don't seem to have seen you all day," murmured Oyvind in the dance. "Let us go down to the ledge from all this crowd and noise."

Gunlaug felt he was something of a stranger, since he had returned to her as from the dead, and welcomed the suggestion.

Standing on the ledge, where the night before they had parted, he pressed her in his arms. "You seem so far away from me, among all those people!" he complained. "It seems as if they had stolen you from me."

"I have struggled with the same feeling about you," she replied; "but now everything is well. You have returned to me."

She was glad they were alone together. Now she would ask him why he had looked so strange that morning. Why the terror she had seen in his every feature, why the glazed look about his eyes. But something, a strange, invisible power held her back. She sighed as she stood beside him, both silent. Life had suddenly lost much of its charm. A thick veil seemed to have been interposed between her and Oyvind, a veil she dared not stretch her hand to remove.

She walked away from him and her foot touched a ringing object. It was the poor, broken remains of Oyvind's harp. She lifted it up into the full light of the moon.

"You must mend it!" she cried.

Tenderly he took it from her and began to fit the broken parts together.

"Yes," he murmured, "I must mend it. I must play — —"

He did not finish his sentence, but stood, with dilated eyes, staring across the meadow, towards the mountain on the west, where a narrow strip of water hugged its side.

"I — must go —," he mumbled with stiffening lips, "I must — go — over there — —!"

She would have asked him what he heard, what he saw, but there was that about him which forbade any question. So she went from him. She climbed the cliffs behind them, crossed the tun and entered the reception-hall. Here she found a dark corner where she gave herself up to gloomy thoughts.

What had happened to Oyvind? Had he been mountain-taken, or had he done as he threatened that night in the shadow of the pine, had he sold his soul to the Christians' Devil?

A young carl invited her to dance, and her attitude brought a vague question to him. Had Gunlaug taken too much of the mead that in such torrential floods ran down their throats? But, no, she was too fine in every fibre of her being for that. Whatever mattered, however, he dared not ask, there was something about her that forbade the question.

Time passed, it seemed hours, till at last she could no longer endure the suspense. With flying feet she crossed the tun, adroitly descended to the bottom and soon stood on the meadow that was the transformed tjern. It was across there, to the mountain, he had gone. She would seek him there. She ran on. Soon the mountain threw its inky shadow over her. Close to its side she saw the gleam of water. Was the tjern to resume its sway? But, no. Underfoot the ground was solid.

She stopped suddenly. At the very edge of the

water, hugging the mountain-wall, lay a human form. She knew it was Oyvind. He lay with his face buried in one arm, his breath coming in quick, sob-like gasps. His free hand was clawing the earth, sending up great tufts of roots and soil into the air while he muttered, deep-throatedly, in an unnatural voice

"Curse the full moon! Curse it!——Always I must obey. May all the curses of the gods fall on it! Always I must go——! Always obey!"

"Oyvind!" cried Gunlaug, wildly kneeling before the prostrate form, and put her hand on his heated forehead.

With a snarl as that from a wild beast he sprang to his feet, trembling like some trapped, wild thing, crouching down as if ready for a spring. His jaw dropped, showing a double row of white teeth, his eyes blazed like living coals.

She stepped back from him, half dead from terror, "Oyvind." She whispered his name now, a deadly fear stifling her voice.

"Is it you, Gunlaug?" he cried, intense relief in his voice, and caught her to him with a vehemence that frightened her still more. There was something in his movements, in his voice, in his very touch that filled her with nameless dread. He seemed full of an evil spirit or else he had changed into something resembling a wild animal. Gunlaug did not know what to think. Neither did she stop to talk.

She wrenched herself out of his arms and, in wild flight, she set out across the meadow. With a loud intake of breath he followed. Now came on a desperate race. She stumbled ahead, voiceless, devoid of all feeling except that of intense fear, while he came racing, close behind her. It was not Oyvind who pursued her now, it was a demon, a beast.

The next moment he would overtake her, she knew it. He would sink dreadful fangs into her tender flesh or tear her with his horrible claws. She was almost across the meadow, back into the moonlight now. She dared not look back at what followed her lest the sight deprive her of reason. On the sandy strip, at the edge of the meadow, she fell, headlong, among the ferns that grew under the overhanging cliffs, where had been the side of the tjern.

Was this the end? she wondered, shuddering. Perhaps it would be better to die now than to live her life under a curse, for this it must be. She had heard of the werewolf, now Oyvind had been turned into one. She could not pray. All her faith in a Greater Being was lost. With her face hidden in her arms, beneath her, she lay, waiting for the blow.

The next moment Oyvind was kneeling beside her, his arms around her shoulders. He picked her up gently and laid her head on his breast.

"Gunlaug, dearest, why did you come?" he cried in a broken voice, but she was too spent to reply. A sudden fit of trembling seized her and she fainted in his arms.

"Oh, my poor Gunlaug!" he murmured, his hot tears falling on her face, "could I but die! But I must live, live and keep the promise, or even worse things will befall!"

CHAPTER XXV

SUMMER was passing. Gunstein and Alfhild had been married for weeks, and yet no bans had been pronounced for Oyvind and Gunlaug. For this there was one apparent reason. Oyvind's patrimony, having obligingly come up from the tjern, was devoid of buildings. He unflinchingly set himself the task of raising proper houses, so he and his bride might enter upon their holdings in a manner befitting proper land-owners. So far it was well, but Gunlaug knew he was in no hurry to finish his work, that he was not eager to consummate his happiness.

Gunlaug shed many tears in the solitude of her chamber. She could not understand what had come over Oyvind. Not that he was amiss in his attentions to her, but there was something about him so new and strange. Times were when such a dreadful expression came into his face, such a far-away look crept into his eyes that she felt he saw something which was hidden from her. She observed, too, that he always avoided her when the moon was full, and she, remembering her experience on the evening of their betrothal, respected his attitude.

Gunlaug often went with her maids to cut the

grass among the rocks, tucked in where the men were unable to reach it with their scythes, or to strip the leaves from the birch for winter fodder. Here she was the merriest of them all, but Gunhild knew something lay heavy on the girl's heart, and she prayed to the Holy Mother and all the gods to remove whatever sorrow had come to her.

Aided by a great number of "timber-men," Oyvind was building up his holdings. He had sold his own homestead, except the house and a small patch of land around it. This gave him means by which he bought the needed articles to complete his work. He cut the pines along the tops of the cliffs, which not only gave him the timber he needed, but allowed the sun to shine on the meadow for a much longer time, changing the place from one of gloom to one of light and sunshine.

Gradually the buildings rose around the circular tun, the living houses, the brewery, bakery, reception and guest halls, larder, drenge-quarter and the kiln for drying the malt. Nor was this all. When the buildings were all completed Oyvind began, with, crowbars, to break up the meadow for his next year's fields. This Gunlaug knew was but a pretext for putting off the wedding. But why? Oyvind still loved her. He was more assiduous in his attentions than ever, but a new note had crept in. He seemed actuated by a wild, unreasoning jealousy, a strange ferociousness in his manners and a constant fear lest he should lose her. How could she conciliate these

conflicting attitudes? Was he, after all, a changeling, sent to her from the mountain, and not Oyvind, she wondered.

The day broke when Oyvind, accompanied by his future father-in-law, went to see the priest. As was usual, the older man acted as spokesman. Clearing his throat he began:

"We come, father, to ask you to pronounce the bans for the nuptials of my daughter and this man," he said. "It should be said for the first time next Sunday."

"Just so," returned the priest, picking up a quill from a neat pile on the table beside him. "Your daughter's name?"

"Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller," answered Thorold proudly.

"And that of the young man?" He nodded towards Oyvind.

"Oyvind the Skald," replied Thorold.

Father Anselmo wrote the name, then he looked up, the pen still poised over the parchment. "Yes?" It was a question.

"That is all," said Oyvind.

"Is it not enough?" asked Thorold, uneasily.

The priest shook his head. "I must know his father's name," he replied.

Thorold grumbled. "That is bad," he muttered, "I never dreamed but you knew your father's name!"

"And I never dreamed it would make any dif-

ference," returned Oyvind, "since to my knowledge I've never set eyes on him."

"We must ask your aunt what your father was called," said Thorold a little later, as they were leaving the priest's house. "She brought you here, she'll know."

Thorold had reckoned without his host. The aunt simply threw her apron over her face and sat silently rocking to and fro. Oyvind motioned his guest to come outside.

"We can do nothing with her when she is like that," he said. "If it is quite necessary that I should know my father's name, I best go over the mountain. I may start tomorrow."

"Wait a few days," said Thorold, "she may give in. The way across the mountains is severe, time is precious, and there is much to be done. Winter is coming on. Bide a few days."

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was late that night when Father Anselmo heard a rap at his study door. Two shadowy figures stood on the threshold. For a considerable time he was closeted with them. Then he let them out by a side door.

It was customary in the North that the whole population from far and near attended divine service. It was Sunday, and Oyvind sat in his usual seat on the men's side. From where he sat he could catch an occasional glimpse of Gunlaug, according as they sat or stood during the service. He had not followed the utterances of the priest very closely, but now he sat up as if awakened to sudden life.

"I now pronounce, for the first time, the bans for Oyvind the Skald, son of Guthorm of Skallet, and Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller." This was what he heard. "Those who know any reason why this marriage should not be consummated, now speak or forever hold your peace!"

Oyvind did not observe the astonished look Gunlaug cast at him, nor the curious glances that were leveled at him by the others. He sat back in his pew, unnerved. Guthorm was his father, then? He

knew now the reason for the peculiar tenderness Guthorm had always shown in his attitude towards him. He knew, too, that he had, for years, been away from his home and, in his younger days, had led more than one Viking-raid, that he had followed the Franks on an expedition all the way to Jorsala. He had lived for some time on the other side of the mountain. He remembered now that Guthorm had told him of the people who lived there. But why had he not sooner acknowledged his son?

He sat, after the first wave of surprise had passed, strangely glad that he had a father. Glad that it was Guthorm. He remembered the night he had fingered the harp, when he was punished and Guthorm came to him. He recalled the day in the forest, and again that midsummer day when Guthorm came to him just as he had returned to consciousness where had been the edge of the tjern. How kind Guthorm had been that morning and how dearly he had needed that kindness! He shuddered as he recalled his terror when he sat gazing at the meadow which, over night, had come to take the place of the tjern.

Little penetrated thru to Oyvind's consciousness that morning. He sat occupied with that which was within. Memories, half-forgotten incidents of his childhood came to him in a new light. Incidents never understood stared him in the face with a new and sudden meaning. His aunt had received aid from some one. He knew now, it was from Guth-

orm, and he knew why. Again the question, Why had Guthorm kept still so long?

Oyvind, like the rest, usually stayed after church to greet friends and, lately, to go home with Thorold and Gunlaug. But that day he stole out before any of the others and walked straight home. He did not wish to speak to his aunt on the subject, that would be useless. He merely wanted to escape the people's curiosity.

He found his aunt silent and inscrutable as usual. She set a trencher of dried goats' flesh before him, with bread and a bowl of ale. Then she seated herself on a corner of the fire-place and began reading the Testament she had brought with her across the mountain.

After his meal he left the house and walked up the narrow path leading from the dim forest to the bright light of the mountain-top.

He was not of Lesje then? His home lay beyond the mountains whose tops he saw glistening above the pines on the opposite side of the valley. He stood gazing far, over the buildings, over the trees on the mountain side with the great gap. What must it mean to know, to have seen what lay beyond? His father knew, so did his mother.

Then his gaze stiffened. His mother? Had he a mother? If so, why had he not been with her as other boys had been with their mothers? If she was alive, why had he not seen her? He remembered his beautiful dream as a child, always his mother

was coming to him. He was always waiting a little while, a day, sometimes he felt sure she would arrive within a week. She would come and take him to her breast and love him. He was always longing to be loved. Then the radiant dream had gradually faded, but now it stood with sudden clearness before him, pointing out a real loss.

Where was she? Why had they not told him anything about his mother? He would ask his father these questions, and upon this answer should depend whether he, who had been so tardily acknowledged Guthorm's son, would accept the title or throw it back in his father's teeth. But he would not seek Guthorm that day. He wanted to be alone.

Oyvind, however, proposed, while a greater power disposed. He seated himself on a boulder lying on a wide shelf on the mountain side. Here he had a fine view over the valley as it lay below him with its winding stream, close-built homesteads, in the tender green aftermath and fields of oats and barley, rich and yellow, waiting for the sickle.

Then he saw a man toiling upward to where he sat. It required no second glance to see that it was Guthorm.

"Good day and thanks for when last we met," said Guthorm, holding out his hand.

"Good day and thanks to you in a like manner," returned Oyvind, slowly, folding his arms across his breast.

Guthorm drew his hand across his eyes as if he wished to hide the sight of this discourtesy.

"Little did I think the son I this day have acknowledged would treat me thus," he complained.

"I wish a brace of questions answered before I can know whether to take your hand or not," replied Oyvind.

"Ask them," invited Guthorm.

"You say today I'm your son. That is well. But if I am your son today, the same thing was true when I was a child. Why did you not acknowledge me sooner? You gave me a very lonely childhood."

"Reason have you in your asking," returned Guthorm. "If I may sit with you I will tell you my story."

Guthorm was still agile, and with a spring he landed on the broad top of the boulder beside his son.

"To begin with, I didn't know you were in existence, didn't know you were expected, till your aunt brought you. She carried you across the mountain, thru yonder gap, in her apron. You were about five days old then, as many days as she had used in crossing. She was comparatively young, and I a free-carl. Of course, in those days, as in these, the good people talked. I could do more for her in her own little home than if she had come to me and I had acknowledged you my son.

"I always had in mind that sometime I should do this, but I never recognized the need till your aunt came, late at night, and told me the bans could not be read till the priest knew your father's name. Late

as it was that night, we trudged to Father Anselmo's house, and I told him. I meant to tell you, so you would be prepared for what was coming, but when I came you were not here. Are you answered?"

"So far, good," replied Oyvind. "The next question is about my mother. Where is she? I heard you say you were a free-carl when my aunt brought me. Were you then not my mother's husband?"

Guthorm set his jaw and a sudden flame shot into his eyes, gradually changing to a soft mist.

"Your mother, lad, is no more," he returned huskily. "She passed into the beyond when she gave your budding life to the world. Oh, lad, it is because of your mother that I believe the story of the Wonderful White Christ and His Virgin Mother. It must be true — surely she has been blessed all these years, while I — —!"

Here he paused, struggling with his tears, looking into the hazy distance as if searching for something now lost to view.

"Were you married to my mother?"

It came as a judgment, not as a question.

Guthorm sat for a moment, staring before him. "Her father refused to give her to me!" he cried bitterly. "Then I left, hoping to find some trusty carls that would help me take her away from him and across the mountains. I wanted to make her my wife, as we were sure Freya had ordained, for we knew very little about the White Christ then. It was before Olaf brought from England the new learning

which now, with fire and sword, he compels us to accept. I, for one, would accept it without fear of an earthly ruler."

"You think, then, this is the true God?" asked Oyvind with a touch of awe in his manner.

"Yes," cried Guthorm, "I think the White Christ is the true God!" — They sat in silence for a while. Then Oyvind held his hand towards the older man.

"Good word, my father," he said. "Perhaps I was undutiful not to take your hands sooner. Had this happened a year ago I should perhaps not have taken it at all; I know more of life now, I understand your position as I never could have grasped it before. I think it was for the best that you waited."

Guthorm returned the pressure of his son's hand, and with his rough leather sleeve wiped a tear from his face.

"This atones for much," he said brokenly. "But don't think I never intended doing something for you. Ever since you arrived, besides giving your aunt a helping hand, I have saved up, so now I can give you a creditable flock of sheep and goats and some fine cattle, too, my boy. It will be fine. For the first time in more than twenty years there'll be a table under which I can put my feet, except up there in Skallet, and feel at home."

Oyvind nodded and Guthorm continued:

"And the grandchildren now, think of them!" He accompanied this with a hearty blow on Oyvind's shoulder, but the young man did not respond to his

humor. Instead, his face grew crimson, then gray, and he changed the topic of conversation.

"Shall we tell Thorold your story?" he asked.

"Why not?" returned Guthorm, who had been keenly observing the younger man. "You don't seem happy enough for a prospective bridegroom; as man to man, tell me, lad. Perhaps my eyes can see where to yours things are obscure."

Oyvind made no reply, but lightly jumped downward from rock to rock until he stood on the path at the foot of the mountain. Guthorm followed, but with due respect for his more aged bones.

"Say nothing more to me about this, father," he begged, giving the elder man his hand. "And believe me, no human being can understand my troubles, no human being can help me bear my burden. None can undo what has already been entered on the recording scroll of a man's life."

Guthorm pressed the proffered hand. "It shall be as you wish," he assured Oyvind. "Far be it from me to seek entrance into your hidden world, but remember this thing, my lad, if you ever must speak of that which now lies in your breast, come to your father, boy, come to me!"

A film gathered over the young man's bright eyes, a tremor edged his mobile lips.

"Thanks shall you have, my father," he replied. "It will always be a joy for me to remember this. From now on I realize that, of all men, you are closest to me."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE wedding day rose clear and calm with a tang of autumn in the air. Again friends and relatives came from far and near to show their respect to the house of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller. The story of the transformed tjern had reached to the utmost confines of the land and was rapidly passed into a legend, which is yet to be told as long as the Northman has a language.

Again Gunlaug had been decked in her wedding finery, again her maidens were gathering about her, chatting like magpies. Weddings were always fraught with great possibilities. They always stimulated the young men to seek their mates among the maidens who, like flies on a sunny day, gathered about a bride. Almost anything might find its inception at a wedding.

Never had "sendings" been so large and numerous, never bridal gifts so large and costly. Guthorm had added his portion to Oyvind's earthly goods in the shape of a small herd of cattle and about a half-hundred sheep and goats. Now Oyvind, tho far from wealthy, was able to "set foot under his own table" as a full-fledged bonde.

Gunlaug was not losing out in giving up the

finery the maidens had so lamented. Guthorm, too, had been a wide-faring Viking and possessed stores of jewelry and silken robes. But Gunlaug seemed oblivious of all this, evidently nursing gloomy thoughts, so it seemed to Gunhild, and she encouraged the maids in their chatter. She would draw their attention away from the bride's pale cheeks and heavy eyes.

Gunlaug was torn between an ecstatic happiness and a benumbing fear. Soon they would stand before the priest, he to make them husband and wife. Why could she not throw off this load? Why this stiffening dread that robbed her happiness of its perfect fruition? Why did she on this day leap in sudden reaction from boundless happiness to shivering despair? What was this undefined, deadly something, like a slimy serpent, ready to spring from, she knew not where?

Was Oyvind happy? The blood receded in a sudden stream to her heart as she recalled the dreadful experience on the eve of their betrothal. The habitually haunted expression of his face and the look of fear in his eyes when she brought him his harp, asking that he mend it so she could hear it sing, filled her with dread. Still the harp was broken, tucked deep into her massive chest, among the linen.

It all dated from the night when the tjern was transformed. Again she asked herself the agonizing question, Had he sold his soul to the Christians' Devil? If so, she wished he'd tell her. She would

gladly give him up if it only would bring back his happiness.

Music in the tun proclaimed Oyvind's coming. With her hand on Gunhild's arm she went to the door. Here she was met by her father, who escorted her to the bridegroom, just riding into the tun, where he and his men would be regaled with mead and honey-cakes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LIKE her wedding day, Gunlaug's married life was a constant mixture of sorrow and gladness. Long periods of happiness, interspersed with sudden realization of the spectre that stalked between them, was her lot. At times, thru Oyvind, evidence came to her of something working in the dark, something in the nature of nauseating filth. Then for days and weeks he would work among his men, all seemingly well with him. But she learned to know that after every such period Oyvind would become wide-eyed and tight-lipped, on the next night of the full moon he would disappear into the forest, perhaps into the mountain. Gunlaug never knew.

After her dreadful experience in the summer she never tried to peep into Oyvind's secret. Where would it all end? was the question she always asked herself, and it was always left unanswered. It was not a cheerful home they made, these two. Never did they attend any of the festive meetings, so common in their day. No more did the tones of the skald's harp or of his vibrant voice fill the guest-hall.

Winter came. The northern winter is always interesting, with its snow and glitter, with the clear

moonlight and the dancing colors of the Northern lights, with the glory of the Northern constellations. It was pleasant in the great kitchen, the blaze from the logs weaving its fantastically changing fret-work over the white-scrubbed floor. In a semi-circle around the fire sat the two young people with their servants and retainers around them. Every one was busy. The maids, with their mistress, were always working with the wool, the men with other materials, a piece of spruce or birch from which they fashioned some utensil, or a piece of leather from which they were engaged in making a leather jerkin, a shoe, or a bit of harness.

But they were not a silent group, such as one might picture busy workers. Laughter and repartee, song and story enlivened every moment till the long evening was over and each was ready to seek rest. It was an age long antedating that of the printed page, when one who could read was regarded as a small wonder. For this reason nearly every one cultivated his talent of telling stories. Those told around Oyvind's fire-place were of all kinds, from the tales of the wild Vikings to those centering about the new God.

Gunlaug observed that her husband took a lively part in the story-telling, till someone introduced a tale of the underearthlings or the Christians' Devil. Then he sought the darkest corner and gloomed apart from the rest till bed-time.

One night he was especially silent, and Gunlaug

stole out into the open. It was the time of the full moon, and he was abnormally worried and sullen at that period. It was a wonderful world into which she tramped. All about her, like a soft, white blanket, lay the new-fallen snow. The mountains stood tall and shining around the basin except where, along the sides, down to their very feet, stood pines, black and mystic in the dazzling light.

She stopped on the ledge that had been their trysting-place. Under her eyes stretched the untrodden snow till it ended in the strip of water, hugging the mountain wall, now protected by a thick sheet of ice. Placid and homelike lay the buildings below, the chimneys belching out the thick smoke, the windows ruddy from the blazing logs within. It was in such moments as these, alone with nature, that Gunlaug could entertain the faintest hope of an ultimate happiness.

There was something which, in its proper time, would enter into their joined lives, and Gunlaug hoped it would smooth out the dreadful fear and sorrow under which her husband moved. Their home would soon be shared by another being, flesh of their flesh, a child that, but for the timely transformation of the tjern, must have been fathered by Gunstein. The coming of his child would bring Oyvind from his strange obsession. Surely the thought of it would give him strength to withstand the strongest temptation that could come to him.

On the following day, while she sat spinning,

she heard him enter the outer hall, leading to her building. She heard him stamp the snow from his feet, stop at the peg to hang up his leather jerkin, then he came into the room where she sat. He stood for a moment looking over her shoulders, at her white fingers busy with the wool. She looked back, into his eyes, shining with his love for her, a faint smile around his mouth.

She dropped the wool into her lap, raised her arms and drew his face down to her own. With a low laugh he raised her from her stool and swung her around into his embrace.

"You are wonderful to me, Gunlaug," he whispered. "Don't give me up! Don't give me up!"

His last words came in a stifled sob and she felt him tremble.

"No, no, Oyvind, you couldn't think of my doing that, dearest. But hush! I have something to tell you, something that will help you to stand on your own feet, something that'll help you forget all evil, Oyvind!"

She had not proceeded far in her story before he straightened up and stood before her, his eyes dilated as in extreme fear, his face once more falling into rigid lines. Without a word he turned and left her. She heard him stop a moment for his cap and jacket, then he walked out into the snow. She trembled to think where.

She sank down on the nearest bench and covered her face with her hands, trembling in her agony as

if she had received a blow. She sat rocking to and fro as in keen physical pain, but not a word came over her lips. Only one great question lived in her heart.

"O, thou White Christ, how long, O how long!" Surely He was one to help! Her aid must come from above; her sorrow was too deep, too terrible, for the Asas to heal!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE first month of the year was drawing towards its close when the baby was born. The hand that for so long had gripped Gunlaug's heart seemed to have relaxed its hold and a new, soft happiness filled her soul with something like the melody of a sacred song. Her despair was gone. With both hands outstretched to Gunhild she begged for the happiness of holding her own child, tears of joy rolling down her cheeks.

The White Christ had been good to her in giving her this child, beautiful, perfect in every particular. If only Oyvind knew, she thought, as the little one lay at her breast. Poor Oyvind! He was wandering about, somewhere in the wilds, obedient to the elfin power that held him. He was wandering in the woods — among the mountains. She dared think no further.

The babe was almost a week old when Oyvind came home. Gunhild saw him come down the wide road that had been cleared thru the gap, reeling like a man drunk with mead. His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes bloodshot, his fair hair matted as if days had passed without a single care having been given to his person. He stopped before the girl as

she stood quietly in front of Gunlaug's building, trembling as a criminal before his judge.

"I have good news for you, Oyvind," she said, trying not to let him see how shocked she felt at his appearance. "You are the father to the most beautiful child I ever saw!"

He stood for a moment, nervously twisting his cap between his fingers, as if in an inward fight for words. Moistening his fevered lips with the tip of his tongue, he whispered hoarsely:

"A child! In mercy, Gunhild, why do you torture me? Is it a boy or is it a girl?"

"It is a boy," she replied, then she fled. With an inarticulate sound that held an oath and a sob of thanksgiving, Oyvind fell to his knees, dropped his face into his upturned palms and wept.

It was a clean, well-groomed man who stepped into his wife's chamber that afternoon. Without a word he knelt before her and took her in his arms.

"My dearest, my darling, I am happy today," he told her. "Maybe all will be well."

Gunlaug lay back against her pillow and looked at him. For the second time since her son's coming she felt her happiness come flooding back into every empty corner of her heart, so suddenly and so completely that she bade fair to become overpowered. She could only lie there and gaze at the shining face of her husband and pat the warm little bundle beside her.

"And now the boy," he said at last, stooping over his son. "Are you sure it is a boy, Gunlaug?"

In the startled silence that followed the strange question she read the old terror in his eyes. With a forced little laugh, meant to hide her disappointment, she replied cheerily:

"Of course it's a boy, Oyvind, and see, he's a very picture of his father, my handsome skald!"

The birth of his son seemed to have worked a complete regeneration in Oyvind. Gunlaug blossomed out in all the loveliness of her girlhood beauty. Laughter and happy song flew, as before, unbidden to her lips. The little one grew and thrived in the atmosphere of love and happiness that surrounded him. It seemed that now Oyvind and Gunlaug were making a happy home.

One little cloud still hung in Gunlaug's horizon. Oyvind had never mended his harp. She never heard him sing, tho in his work among the men he seemed as happy as any one of them. She must be patient. Some day he would mend his harp. Some day he would waken the old melodies, some day he would sing the old songs. The Great Power that had done so much for her would not forsake her again. Their fate was with Olaf's God, whom she was more and more inclined to trust, as she realized that her hurt was too great a one for the Asa-gods to heal. She would trust the White Christ.

One evening in the early fall she received a rude awakening from her self-induced dreams. They were seated outside of her building on a long, wooden bench. The sun had set and the moon, in her serene

majesty, was sailing across the sky, her round disk from time to time hidden by heavy clouds scudding towards the east. The cattle and sheep and goats were all housed, and the homing noises of the wild things were subsiding.

The transparent darkness that reigned while the moon was under a cloud showed her Oyvind's face and his hands, hanging loosely folded between his knees, as unsteady patches of light. Then she saw him clasp his hands in a sudden wrench, as if with sheer physical force he would hold himself down where he sat. His face was turned towards the narrow strip of water along the mountain-wall. Again he heard sounds she could not hear! Again he saw something hidden from her sight!

Again the cold hand gripped her heart, squeezing out all her new-found happiness. Again the old dread and bitterness entered her soul, and to it was added a new element of suffering. He was the father of her child. Now she had a double claim on him, and yet she knew that the dreadful pain and fear of the past would once more come upon her.

Would he yield to the mystic temptation? Would he once more take up his old way of roaming in the forest and mountains? With her hands clasped over her painfully throbbing heart she sat watching him as he silently fought an unseen enemy. Would he conquer? Would he yield to this fiendish thing that so dominated him? Was there, then, no remedy? Would Oyvind conquer? Would he yield? For a

moment one possibility tipped the balance, the next moment the other side was about to win. Had he the strength to master himself?

If he would only turn from the impotent Asa-gods to the White Christ whom she in her despair had learned to seek! She prayed for him now, but her prayer was only half-hearted. She implored the aid of the White Christ and His Virgin Mother, but mingled with the prayers was a numbing, superstitious fear. Then Oyvind gave up the struggle.

He rose from the bench, and without a word to her, without seemingly to realize her presence, he turned his back to her and walked rapidly out on the meadow towards the spot where the faint gleam betrayed the location of the narrow strip of water, lying along the mountain-wall. Soon he was out of sight, part and parcel of the night that was closing around him. And yet it was not the darkness that so much absorbed him as the sinister power which removed him from the proper place he was meant to occupy in the scheme of things.

Now Gunlaug lost hope. Not so often as before the birth of their son did he follow the lure of the mountain, but she knew it was always there, a sinister power, in abeyance. Always there would come a night of the full moon when he would listen to the siren voice that drew him, and walk into hidden paths. When the fearful thing that worked its way with him had lost control, then he would return to his home, limp, gloomy, miserable.

Then winter set in. But for the little one Gunlaug could not have lived. The impression was abroad in the land that things were not right on the meadow, between Oyvind and Gunlaug. The neighbors talked freely, discussing his queer behavior, pitying his wife. Few visitors ever set foot in their tun. Even the maids and the carls grew uneasy.

Around the fire, during the long evenings, there was little of song, little of story-telling, and even less of laughter. Gunlaug often wondered if Oyvind after all had taken the fatal plunge, and this gloomy man was another, a stranger, occupying his flesh, a changeling! Then who was he, this one, who by the necromancy of an unseen power had been permitted to take his place at her side?

She often wished she could take her troubles to Gunhild. But put into words, her fear seemed based on such puny grounds. It was true that when he returned from his wanderings, Oyvind seemed afraid, he avoided her touch and started, at her nearness, in sudden panic. But perhaps he was only tired and hungry, it was not easy to climb the rocks or wade thru the deep snow. Was she a proper judge? she asked herself. She, too, had roamed thru the forest and climbed the mountains, yet, to her knowledge, no one had ever accused her of being mountain-taken, of having sold her soul to the Christians' Devil.

CHAPTER XXX

SPRING came with her fairy steps across the mountains, the forest, and wold. She smiled on the dark, inscrutable pines, creeping upward on the mountain's broad bosom, whose top, in radiant effulgence, threw back the sunshine she so lavished upon it. She glinted from the shining leaves of the birch, and brought to the velvety meadows her offerings of gay spring flowers as for the garnering of a festive gown. She wielded her magic brush and with her brightest colors beautified the charms of the close-lying scenes, while she tucked the far distances away in cool, purple shadows.

The song-birds held hourly musicales in the leafy thickets, and in the fields the carls and maidens sang their roundelays. Life was so full in the spring, it had so many possibilities then, in the North.

Seeding was finished, and down on the meadow the girls and herd-boys were gathering up the cattle and sheep and goats. They were taking them to the chalet on the mountain side. The air was full of sounds, the herd-girls' tuneful yodle, the sweet notes of the lute, and the soft sound of the goat-herd's flute. Softly, intermingled, came the mooing of the

cows that were leaving the calves behind, the bleating of the sheep and goats, the baying of the shepherd dogs, and the sounds of various bells, from the tiny tinkle of that one tied about the neck of the black wether to the subdued clang of the great bronze bell suspended around the neck of Svanros, Gunlaug's pet cow and the leader of them all. And from the mountain, which took no initiative, came mixed echoes as in subdued reverberations it reproduced every sound thrown against its naked ramparts.

According to a saying in the Northland, the chalet-girl is happy twice a year: on the day when she moves to the chalet and again when she moves back to the homestead. The maids of Oyvind and Gunlaug presented no exception to the rule.

They had prospered, and it was a fine herd of cattle, an excellent flock of sheep and goats Gunlaug saw file along as she stood at the gate, counting them as they passed. The bell-cow came first, then the others, swinging their horned heads majestically from side to side, following their leader, a young girl who, yodling and coaxing, went at their head.

Then came the sheep with not a few lambs, their gentle eyes to the front, tripping along behind the bell-wether which followed the boy with the lute.

The goats came next. Here was neither docility nor majesty. More than one boy was needed to gather up the stragglers as they pranced about, bent on mischief. Gunlaug laughed heartily when she

saw Harald, who stopped and at the point of a stick tried to urge ahead an old patriarch with a long beard. He was not as benevolent as he looked, for he turned on the boy. Harald turned, too, while Billy eagerly planted his long, straight horns in the part of the boy's anatomy left nearest to him, and sent him spinning down the dusty road. The boy frantically scrambled to all fours. This presented such a splendid opportunity for Billy that he seized it and with a second assault, sent Harald still farther on the homeward trend. He then fell to innocent nibbling of the grass along the road-side, till Balder, the dog, brought him into submission.

Gunlaug was now left with only two maids, Gunhild and Ylve, to do the work of the women. Oyvind kept one man. The others were in the woods, hewing the trees, getting them to the homestead, so that when winter again returned to the Northland there would be an abundance of fuel.

Oyvind's periodic stays in the forest became of longer duration, too, as the spring passed into summer. Only one ray of light illuminated Gunlaug's darkness. He had been happy after Olaf's birth, she would tell him that she expected another child. Perhaps that would complete what had been begun by the little son who was now two years old.

And so when he returned to her one day she told him that by midsummer another child would arrive to call him father.

But she was disappointed. His face turned an

ashen white, his lips straightened into a pale line, his fists closed in a tight grip. His form became rigid, he shook as with intolerable fear. Without a word he turned from her and fled, as from one who was polluted with pestilence.

Weeping, she went into her chamber and knelt beside Olaf's bed, hiding her face in the blanket. She had no hope now, and she could not pray.

It was a month later, and Gunlaug was sitting alone on the bench outside of her building. She was puzzled and not a little scared, for at several points on the mountain sides she saw columns of smoke. The men were being called together on the plain near the church, where from time immemorial they had met for the Thing. What did this meeting portend?

Was it a Thing to read and acecpt another law from Olaf, or was it a meeting to discuss the possibility of war? The times were so unruly, they might expect almost anything. The people of Lesje had been fortunate in escaping warfare for a long time.

She was not long to remain ignorant. Over the gap she saw a horseman coming down to the meadow. A single glance told her that he was a king's messenger. He stopped his horse before her.

"I bring God Almighty's and Olaf's salutation!" he cried. Then he opened the voluminous folds of his cloak and took out a small, carved staff and held it for a moment aloft. There was to be a Thing, then.

But what new laws would they now be compelled to accept? Perhaps the king himself was coming!

Gunlaug sighed as she rose to salute the rider. Then he turned his horse and rode away as fast as he had come.

What could she do? Would it be safe to let Oyvind be missing from the Thing? And where could she seek him? She was to become still more puzzled, for the next day a young man, Bjørn from Sogni, whom she knew well, rode into the tun. He, too, carried a messenger-token. She stood up and told him that Oyvind was away, that she did not know where he was, did not know when he would return. Then, motioning her to come up closer, he opened his jacket. She tumbled back, deathly pale. Then it was to be war. Bjørn from Sogni carried an arrow.

On the appointed day the men gathered for the Thing in their Sunday clothes, and as was customary, stood in groups and talked. In low voices they discussed what was now of supreme interest. They stood sullen, determined, casting frequent glances into the woods. In there behind the rocks and trees they had concealed their bows and arrows, their clubs and battle-axes. They were prepared to fight for their right of adherence to the Asa-gods.

"It is quite plain that the Asas are angry because the people of Lesje have turned their backs on the old gods," declared Thorold the Strong. "See what scant crops rewarded our sowing last year. Now the

summer is dry. If we freely worship the new gods we may starve to death, we with our families."

A low murmur rippled thru the crowd.

"On no account let us this day accept the White Christ!" cried Gunstein.

This brought no reply, for just then Olaf's messenger rode into their midst. He brought his horse to such sudden stop that the fiery animal rose for a moment on his hind legs, pawing the air and snorting as with wild fear.

"I bring you God Almighty's and Olaf's salutation!" the man cried in a loud voice. "He will but now ride into your midst and will here hold Thing!"

It was as the messenger had told them. Olaf soon came riding up to the plain, accompanied by Bishop Grimkel of Nidaros.

The king wore a hat with swaying plumes and a wide cape lined with crimson and embroidered in gold. His tight-fitting jacket was also of crimson, with fine lace at the throat, bosom, and wrists. His small-clothes were of black velvet, closed at the knees with gold-buckles; he wore white leg-coverings and small, pointed shoes.

His companion wore a bishop's robe and a coif on his head, the staff of the exalted office in his hand. The king and bishop, accompanied by many knights, walked to the very top of the eminence, and Olaf addressed the people. He demanded that they should take the vows of Christianity.

The bønder equally loudly objected. At a sign

from Gunstein they turned and, as one man, they ran towards the woods, where their weapons were hidden, but they stopped half-ways.

Here they were met by Olaf's men, who rushed out at them from an ambush. Now they stood facing spears and bows. Some were pierced by spears, some were wounded and taken to the rear, some were bound and laid by for hostages. The bønder now saw they had been outwitted. There was nothing left for them but to return to Olaf and agree with him.

The bishop now, staff in hand, stepped forth and administered the oath by which the Northmen abjured the Asa-gods. Standing in concentric circles around Bishop Grimkel, they repeated after him:

"Ec forsaka Diablae, allum Diaboles wercum end Wordum, Thundaer end Odin end allum them unholdem de hira sint!"

And now that this was over, those who on the first visit of Olaf to Lesje were not baptized, received Holy Baptism at the hands of the bishop. In this Grimkel was assisted by Father Hieronymus, whom Olaf had brought with him, that he might assist Father Anselmo in his parish work while another church should be built in Lesje.

Then Olaf announced that all the men, women, and children who that day did not promise to forsake the "Devil and all his works and all his words and Thor and Odin with all the unholy deeds that followed in their worship," must take the vow and be

baptized as soon as they could be brought either to the church or to the house of the priests.

After this the people, with great acclaim, once more accepted Olaf as their king. His new laws were read, and equally loud voices were raised in their approval. Olaf then parted from the people of Lesje with much good-will, and the men, after they had arranged to bury their dead and care for the wounded, went home, "each by himself," as Olaf had demanded.

Any infringement of the king's laws would mean the loss of life or limb, or they would be held as hostages and sent to Gardarike or Jorsala. From there Olaf went to bring the fear of the White Christ into the hearts of the people in Vaage, Lom, Breida, and neighboring country, but he would be sure to leave those behind him who would report any irregularity.

Never more would they dare offer a lamb or a goat to the Asas for peace and a good season. They would now be compelled to acept almost any kind of a crop and likely have to fight like devils. If only the White Christ would give them a little, they would be satisfied if He'd give them enough corn so they wouldn't starve, they and their wives and little ones. They would not ask too much to begin with.

Somehow, too, the White Christ was too gentle, too forgiving to make the proper kind of a god for the adventurous Vikings. They were proud of their raids, their blood-shed. Proud of the fear, spread by the

name of the Northman over the whole world. The worship of the grim Asa-gods, Odin, Thor, and Frey at least, made a better setting for the tumultuous warriors than that of the gentle, peaceful Son of Man, the Divine Master, the Man of Sorrows. He belonged with the lowly fisherman on the margin of Gennesareth. He belonged among the peaceful shepherds on the hills of Palestine.

CHAPTER XXXI

OYVIND was away from home when his second child was born. Gunlaug knew not where, except as Guthorm had said one day when he had walked down from Skallet:

"He is in his old home, Gunlaug, eating his heart out."

She would have gone to him, but her one fear kept her back. What would she learn if she came upon him unawares, as she had that night so long ago now? Was he consorting with the unholy elf-people? Would he not then be more fully lost to her than if he had died, leaving but his image of clay? What if she were to learn, without a doubt, that he had sold his soul to the Christians' Devil!

This time Oyvind did not come home to receive the news. Gunhild, one afternoon while Gunlaug slept, went to him. It was towards sunset when she emerged from the fringe of birches that stood between the big trees and the clearing of his tun. Would she find him there? Would he return with her to his wife, who was sick and heart-broken? Gunlaug would not live long if Oyvind did not soon come home, she knew that.

Even as she stood there she could see the white

face, the large questioning eyes of Oyvind's wife. Always they were mutely asking her why he did not come to look at his child. Why, oh, why did he not come to her? Surely the arrival of a second child would remove the curse which for a time seemed to have been lifted with that of their first-born.

It was because Gunhild no longer was able to endure Gunlaug's dumb agony that she had gone in search of Oyvind.

She paused in the open door. He sat before her, his face hidden in his arms, which were folded on the table before him. In the droop of his shoulders, in the bend of his neck, in the contractions of the shuddering muscles lay pictured an abysmal despair. She walked up to him and placed her hand on his head.

With a hoarse cry he sprang to his feet. He stood before her rigid as with fear, staring at her. His hair was matted and disheveled, his eyes were red and swollen, his lips were livid, and his face looked like a death-mask.

"What do you want?" he panted.

"I didn't come to hurt you, and I came from Gunlaug," said Gunhild.

"But why are you here?" he mumbled, sinking once more into his former attitude, but with his head up, his eyes fixed upon her as in mute prayer for mercy. It seemed as if his very life would depend upon the first word that came from her lips. The pity in her heart prevented her from uttering the

harsh words she had rehearsed on the way, and she spoke gently

"I came to tell you that your wife has given birth to another child," she said.

His eyes dilated in fear. With twitching lips, that hardly managed to form the words, he asked:

"Is it — a girl — or a boy?"

"A tiny girl, this time," she replied soothingly.

For a moment he sat as in stupefied silence. Then with a dreadful cry, as that of a wild animal receiving its death-wound, he rose to his feet and began pacing the room. He cursed all things in heaven and on earth. He cursed all things under the earth. At last his language became so fearful that Gunhild put her hands to her ears and fled from his presence as she would have fled from the Christians' Devil.

On the edge of the cliff she stopped and looked down on the peaceful scene below. What ungodly power possessed Oyvind? He was a veritable demon! Where would it all end? She trembled in fear and disgust and hoped Gunlaug had not missed her. She would never tell her what had happened, nor where she had been. She still hoped that Oyvind would come back to his right mind and seek his wife. He still loved her, she knew that, and the boy, too. But what could there be about a new-born babe to make a man curse as Oyvind had cursed?

CHAPTER XXXII

GUNHILD'S surmise proved correct. It was not many days before Oyvind, clean and in his right mind, came to see his family. He was as tender as usual towards his wife, but he looked sick and miserable when his little daughter was laid in his arms. Gunlaug sighed. She entertained no illusions. The birth of her second child was not to remove the curse, then. Again she bade farewell to her golden dreams.

She realized that this dreadful thing which had come between them would always stalk as a gaunt spectre in their path. She would live for her babies, Gunlaug determined this; but she also determined that no more innocent little ones should be projected into the maelstrom of their unhappy family life.

Oyvind felt relieved when she suggested that he should establish himself permanently apart from her, on the opposite side of the tun. She, too, felt better, for so much that was nerve-racking was removed. He could come and go now, and she would not have to know.

And so the months rolled around. They sat one night together on the bench before Gunlaug's building, talking of the little daughter.

"She is ten months old now, we must have her christened," she said.

"Is there any special reason why this must be done at once?" he asked with white lips.

Gunlaug trembled. The spell was upon him. Again he'd seek the mountain, perhaps to assist in the fearful orgies said to take place within. But why this sudden fear?

"I know no special reason for sure," she said as calmly as her shaking voice permitted; "one hears so much these days."

"Promise me you won't have her christened till you must," he said harshly, rising.

He walked back to his own building. A little later she saw him as he hastened across the meadow to the point where the narrow strip of water hugged the perpendicular mountain-wall at the west. He belonged to the mountain, after all, not to the Christians' Devil! Who was there to know that the mountain spirit was not in league with the Christians' Devil?

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was not long before Gunlaug knew that the rumors which had but faintly reached her were true. Already men were scouring the valley for those who were delinquent in their religious duties. Their boy had been christened, but from that day neither she nor Oyvind had attended church. They had not even been to confession, had not visited the priests as they had been commanded by Olaf. Oyvind had been away for a week now. She wished he would return so she could have him arrange for the child's christening.

One day Guthorm walked down to the meadow, and she opened her heart to him.

He sat for a few moments twisting his massive hands, lying folded on his knees.

"I shall go to him," he said at last; "I know where to find him."

A dull red mounted to Oyvind's face when he saw his father emerge from the fringe of birch and come toward him, as he sat in the shade by his house.

"Good day, Oyvind, good word and thanks for the day when last we met," he said.

"Good word, and thanks to you in like manner,"

returned Oyvind, but without taking the proffered hand.

Guthorm seated himself beside his son and went on with evident unconcern.

"They are gathering up the children for baptism. "I suppose they have been to see you, down on the meadow?"

"No!" replied the younger man, sitting straight and rigid.

"I understand the punishment is very severe against those who fail to bring them," Guthorm continued. "Gunlaug is uneasy about the girl."

Oyvind sat trembling. "Did she send you?" he whispered.

"No," replied Guthorm, "I offered to come."

Oyvind sank together even more hopelessly than before. In his eyes burned the flame of one who feels himself eternally damned.

"Tell her where I am," he whispered. "But, as you value your own salvation, do not ask her to come."

"Do you want her to come?" inquired Guthorm.

Oyvind shook his head and bit his lip as if to ward off a thoughtless word. "I — I can not say — dare not say," he stammered.

"Tell me, lad, what has gone amiss with you?" begged Guthorm, laying a hand on his son's shoulder. "My experiences have been varied and strange. Perhaps I could understand, perhaps I could help."

"No, no," groaned Oyvind, edging away from

the detaining hand, "no one can help me. I dare not tell you my troubles. That would bring instant disaster to Gunlaug, to the children, besides to me, perhaps to many others. No, I must keep still. I must continue to suffer in silence. There is no other way till the end of it all comes."

"But what will the end be?" asked Guthorm, "Gunlaug is breaking her heart. Your father suffers, and Thorold the Strong is grief-stricken. You may suffer in silence, but you can not suffer alone."

Oyvind dropped his face into his hands. "I know," he groaned, "you are speaking the truth. But by keeping silent I can stave it off for a time, but the catastrophe, in the end it must come. In the end it must come."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE midsummer sun had set when some one rapped on the door leading to Father Anselmo's study. On the threshold stood Gunlaug and Gunhild.

"What can I do for you, my daughters?" asked the priest as soon as they were seated.

"It is to speak to you of my husband that I have come, Father," sobbed Gunlaug. The priest, knowing well the value of tears, stood quietly waiting while she wept. Then she continued, "he acts so strangely."

"In which way?" asked Father Anselmo.

"For days he seems right in every way, then of a sudden some power that I can not see gets the upper hand of him. This leads him into the woods, into the mountains. He almost runs in his eagerness to be gone. When he returns, sometimes after hours, sometimes after days, he seems afraid to look at me, to touch me. He looks old and worn as with much walking or from hard labor. Sometimes, methinks he has walked miles, but why?"

"Can you give me no reason for all this?" asked the priest.

"Sometimes I imagine he'd have me abandon the

home down on the meadow and come to him in his old home," she replied, "but he never said so in words. I don't know what to do. I come to you, Father, for guidance."

"And may the Holy Mother show me the advice you need, my daughter," he replied fervently. "But there must be something to account for this strange aberration."

Gunlaug shook her head. "I don't account for it any longer,' she said.

"You think, then, that a curse hangs over the meadow?" he asked. "Your holding came up from the tjern, didn't it? Can the underearthlings have any power over it, think you, after it was blessed and dedicated by the Holy Church to the full use of man?"

Again she shook her head.

"I can say nothing," she replied. "My ideas are so fleeting, they have so little ground, that should I speak of them it would prove misleading. I shall abide by your judgment. If you think I should take the children and go to my husband, to whom I feel more and more drawn, I shall do so. If you advise staying on the homestead, I shall stay. I only desire your guidance."

"I will tell you what I think is best," he returned, "in a few days Bishop Sigurd is coming with several priests and attendants. Olaf has given us a church-bell, and now a new church is to be built. It is for this the bishop is coming, to find the site for it and

to bless it. Also he looks for cases of parents' neglect in baptizing children and for those who still indulge in the worship of the Asa-gods."

Gunlaug looked questioningly at Father Anselmo and he continued:

"Go back to your home, my daughter, fast with all your people! Fast and pray! When Bishop Sigurd comes I shall tell him of your husband, the bishop will know what is best. In the meantime, if you are troubled in spirit come to me. I shall do my utmost to guide you, my daughter."

After many thanks the two women left the priest's house.

"Somehow I feel that the Church of God is going to help me out of my difficulty," said Gunlaug.

Gunhild voiced a prayer of thankfulness for that measure of comfort. With hope they could endure much.

CHAPTER XXXV

FATHER Anselmo had another visitor that night. When the heavy door swung open it was to admit Brynjulf, house-carl of Gunstein the Brave. He sat on the bench shown him, dumbly twisting his cap and gazing at his cow-hide clogs.

"Is there any punishment for not baptizing a child a year old, Holy Father?" he asked at last.

"That depends upon the conditions," replied Father Anselmo, "whether the parents refuse their child the blessings of the Holy Sacrament or if they are ignorant of its needs or if they are too far from the church. Whatever holds them back, they should see me. I am here to help them."

"Not any of the last are the real reasons, Father," returned Brynjulf. "The father is a heathen who holds himself to the Asas. He runs like a madman in the forest and among the mountains. Some think that he has been mountain-taken. Others hold that, for the land which came up from the tjern, he sold his soul to the Christians' Devil — —"

"Sold what, to whom?" cried Father Anselmo.

"To er — er — our Devil, Holy Father," returned Brynjulf, blinking in sudden fright. This slip of the tongue! And — the priest!

"How dare you make such assertions?" asked the priest warmly.

"People have met him in the mountains and along the narrow strip of water along the high mountain at the side of the meadow," returned the man nervously. "No one can climb the mountain, yet he gets lost there. And they run from him when they meet him after that, especially under the full moon. He is not human then, but a werewolf. His eyes glow, his teeth grit and snap, his nails protrude like claws at the tips of his fingers. He can run as fast as the rabbit or the wolf then.

"He has never brought his child to be baptized. I know where to find him when he is in his right mind. I will help you bring him to justice."

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked the priest, who began to perceive a little light.

"I am speaking of Oyvind the Skald, son of Guthorm of Skallet," replied Brynjulf eagerly. "His wife is the proud Gunlaug, daughter of Thorold the Strong, son of Sigvat Skaldaspiller."

"I shall do nothing about this now," said the priest deliberately. "Bishop Sigurd comes here soon. I will lay the matter before him."

With this Brynjulf was dismissed.

Then Father Anselmo called his colleague, and the two men sat discussing the strange story.

"It must be the curse of an evil conscience," observed Father Hieronymus as he extinguished his tallow dip, preparatory to going back to his cell,

where he would take a short nap before beginning the day's activities.

"I shall request of Bishop Sigurd that the church be built on the meadow," said Father Anselmo, in parting. "That will remove the general fear and the deep superstition that hangs over the place."

A few days later Bishop Sigurd arrived. He listened quietly to Father Anselmo's tale of Oyvind.

"We must rescue that man from his evil ways!" he exclaimed. "We can do more to gain men for the White Christ by saving this one than by months of warfare, such as pursued by Olaf. In a measure it will counteract the cruelties the king inflicts upon the pagans. We'll build the church on Oyvind's holdings. Say nothing to him of this nor about the baptism of his child. Do not approach him with anything religious. Tell everybody to keep away from him."

"That won't be difficult, according to the tales I hear," replied Father Anselmo. "No one dares go near him, and he simply runs at the approach of every one."

"Very well, leave him alone for the present," concluded the bishop. "At the dedication of the church we'll baptize his child. Then we'll march around the church, in procession, and sprinkle the ground with Holy Water. That will re-dedicate the meadow, as it were, it will remove their superstitious fear. When that is done we'll get this wild skald."

It remained at that. Oyvind was left in his old

home and knew nothing of the activities pursued on his meadow, where the structure of the new church was rising against the blue sky. It was a marvel, the rapidity with which the building grew. There was an abundance of timber, and the workers were willing, but even that did not explain its wonderful progress. The people once more gathered on the top of the cliffs, looking down, filled with awe at the rapid advancement, which they declared was greater than that of mere human agency.

It was early autumn when the edifice was finished, its graceful steeple piercing the clear sky, the square bell-tower, in which hung Olaf's bell, completed. Bishop Sigurd had arrived. On the following Sunday the church would be dedicated and the meadow blessed by the bishop. The meadow that had risen from the gloomy depths of Blackwater Tjern would forever be free from all evil powers.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IT was on Saturday evening, before the day set apart for the dedication of the church. Oyvind, as usual, sat outside the door of his old home, his aunt stealing silently about, in her household duties. Guthorm stepped out from among the birches, crossed the tun, and stopped before his son.

After proper greetings he seated himself beside him and without any preliminaries began:

"I have just returned from beyond the mountains to the west," he said. "Strange things have befallen the people there. You know when Olaf came thru here he went from Lesje farther down the valley, but it was not till recently that he came with full force upon the people there.

"When Dalegudbrand learned that Olaf was coming he sent his men out with messenger-tokens, the arrow and the staff, too. So they knew it would be war as well as Thing. He also caused fires to be built along the mountain-side, and from far and near the men came streaming with the axes on their shoulders.

"Soon Gudbrand got word of Olaf's movements, so his men met him at Hundthing. Hundreds came

in boats, across Laugen. Gudbrand stood before his people and said:

"'Olaf comes among us with his new god. He desires that we shall break our old ones asunder. It is strange that the earth does not open and swallow him up or that our gods let him go around and talk as he does. But Thor has always stood by the Northmen. When we carry him out, Olaf's god will melt and he will look upon nothing.'

"'Olaf shall never escape from the bønder of Gudbrandsdalen!' shouted the men in reply.

"Dalegudbrand's eighteen-year-old son took seven hundred men and went to Breida. Here they were to watch Olaf's movements. Arrived at Hoff they had news of the king and stayed there for three days. Men streamed thereward, from Vaage and Lom, not wanting Christianity. In Breida, too, the bønder heard about Olaf's project and prepared for battle.

"Soon, at the head of his men, Olaf came. In his loudest voice he spoke to the bønder while standing before them, asking them to accept Christianity.

"The bønder replied: 'We shall give you and your men something to do this day except mocking at us.'

"They rushed towards the king's men, striking at their shields and brandishing their battle-axes, but the king's men rode forward with their spears. Then the bønder turned and fled.

Gulbrand's son showed fight and was captured. Him Olaf gave his life and sent to his father.

"'Tell Dalegudbrand that I shall come,' he said.

"In Gudbrandsdal the bønder decided to hold Thing, agreeing to accept a truce as long as the Thing lasted. On the day set a heavy rain fell. Still they met. Olaf then stood before the people and said that the bønder of Lesje, Lom, Vaage, and Breida had accepted Christianity, forsaken their old gods, and that they had broken up their sacrificial houses. They now believed in the true God, who had made heaven and earth and all things that live.

"'Dost call him a god whom neither thou nor any one else can see, Olaf?' shouted a man from the crowd. Another took up the shout.

"'We have a god that can be seen any day,' he went on, 'but he is not here today, because it has rained. He appears so terrible and grand that fear will mix with your blood when Thor looks at you with his sharp eyes. Tomorrow let your god make a cloudy day, but not with rain. Then tomorrow at this place we'll meet you."

"So Olaf went back to his lodging, taking Gudbrand's son with him.

"'What is your god like?' Olaf asked the boy.

"'Like Thor with the hammer,' replied Gudbrand's son. 'He is of immense size and is on a great stand. Neither silver nor gold is wanting about him. He is hollow, and every day he receives four cakes of bread and much mead.'

"The king watched all night in prayers. In early

morning he went to mass. From there he went to the Thing. It was such a day as the bonde had requested, cloudy but with no rain.

"Bishop Sigurd stood with his staff in hand, the bishop's coif on his head, talking to the people.

"Then Gudbrand stood up.

" 'Many things have been told us by this horned man with the staff in his hand, crooked as a ram's horn,' he said. 'Since your god is so wonderful, let him make us a clear, sunshiny day tomorrow. Then we shall meet here again. We shall then either fight with you or agree with you.'

"The next day Olaf went to the Thing accompanied by Bishop Sigurd and Kolbein Sterke. Kolbein had his club in his hand. Then the men brought Thor. The god, as the boy had told Olaf, was ornamented with much silver and gold.

" 'Where, now, Olaf, is thy god?' asked Dale-gudbrand. 'Methinks he'll not now carry his head so high. Neither you nor the man with the horn, whom you call bishop, will carry your head so high or be so bold now that Thor has come to the Thing and looks at you with his sharp eyes. I see you are terrified. Now is the time for you to throw away your appointments and believe in the god who has your fate in his hands.'

" 'Not so!' cried Olaf. 'But see, there comes our God in great splendor!' With this he pointed to the rising sun. All the men looked towards the east. Then Kolbein Sterke struck the god with his club

and broke it. Mice, almost as big as cats, rushed out, and reptiles and adders, scattering in every direction. Now the bønder fled in terror. But their boats had been pierced and their horses had been untied and sent into the forest. Now there was nothing left for them but to go back to Olaf.

"Dalegudbrand then stood before Olaf and Bishop Sigurd and said:

" 'We have this day sustained great injury to our god. And now that Thor will no longer aid us, we must turn to yours.'

"So Gudbrand and all his people were baptized. Olaf is building a church in Gudbrandsdal, and Bishop Sigurd left priests and teachers there to serve the people.

"And so," concluded Guthorm, "I am telling you this so you may profit by their example. Tomorrow the church here in Lesje is to be dedicated by the bishop, and then your daughter must be baptized or I will not answer for the consequences. Olaf will no more tolerate paganism in Lesje than he did in the neighboring valley."

This tale from Gudbrandsdal had been spread pretty well in that part of the country and it added to Gunlaug's perplexities. She must take the little girl to church for baptism, but what should she do about Oyvind. His punishment would be severe if he did not come and stand up with her during the baptismal ceremony.

She could no longer stave it off. Now Guthorm

had spoken to Oyvind, and he knew what had to be done. Would he still roam thru the forest and in the mountain like a madman, or would he make himself tidy and, like an honest father, stand up with her in the church?

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE momentous day dawned white and clear. Gunlaug, with all her people, were up betimes. They were all going to church, and she, followed by her maids, carried the baptismal child, clad in fine, white linen. On her heart lay a burden heavier than usual. It was with difficulty that she kept the tears back. If only Oyvind had come! Who knows what the power of the divine guidance might do for him. Perhaps the holy service of blessing and consecration would remove the curse which, like a cancer, was eating into their lives.

Guthorm came towards her from the church. She was glad when she saw him. It removed some of the agony she felt in coming alone with her child before the bishop. Guthorm had little to say. He had talked with Oyvind, but did not know to what end.

He was much pleased to see his little granddaughter. Taking her from the mother's arms, he said to the child

"And now the little one is to be baptized. She who otherwise would have been the devil's, will now be of God. She will be a little Christian maiden."

Out in the open, in front of the church, stood a multitude of people. They had come from far and

near, many whom Gunlaug had not seen since her wedding. This was a wonderful occasion.

They were talking in an undertone. She felt their eyes sweep her, then many of them kept still. Evidently they had talked about her, and Gunlaug felt her cheeks burn, her eyes heavy with unshed tears. Without a word to any one and holding her child close to her breast, she walked to the side entrance. She would enter the sacristy and complete the preliminaries for the child's baptism.

She came face to face with her father. He greeted her with a few words. It was plainly to be seen that he, too, suffered, and his eyes shone with feverish brilliancy. Guthorm went and talked to Thorold and, as was customary among the Northmen, they talked of everything that concerned them but a little, of the beautiful weather, of the laws they must henceforth obey, and of the prospects for a long, mild autumn.

Bishop Sigurd arrived. He was accompanied by a man in a blue, richly embroidered cloak, and attended by many priests in black cassocks and cowls. All eyes were on the bishop and his companion, who was tall and dark, with regular features and flashing blue eyes. He was dressed like a courtier, but he had an air about him which caused the curious ones to whisper that he had not come from Nidaros, but from a distant country, perhaps, indeed, from the land of the Danes.

The bishop and his followers entered the church,

and after them the populace began filing in. The sexton rang the bell, and a dreadful thing happened. Guthorm was the first one to observe it. He was just ready to step on the threshold of the outer portico when he felt himself sinking in soft mud.

He looked around to those behind him and saw them in the same predicament. An awful cry rose. He looked across the meadow, where several horsemen were urging their beasts forward; but the horses stuck ever deeper in the mud and, where they had passed, the water spurted up in the footprints of the horses.

Guthorm knew what it meant. The curse Oyvind had feared was fallen. If the new god was unable to help them now they were doomed. In another moment Blackwater Tjern would again be in ascendency. In another moment it would close upon them. From then, for all time, it would lie brooding over another tragedy. Something must be done!

With a desperate pull he extricated himself. Then he ran into the church. A few whispered words to Bishop Sigurd sufficed. Instantly the procession was formed. Bishop Sigurd came first, holding aloft the holy relic of the true cross, the priests followed in line with lighted candles, banners and swinging censers. They marched around the church while the bishop chanted the Kyrie. Then the ground became solid under foot.

Still there was danger. In front of the church a pond was rapidly forming. Soon it would eat

away its very foundation. Bishop Sigurd stopped and looked at its black waters. While the priests marched around it in procession he chanted the Litany, and then he knelt on its shore and prayed to the White Christ, the Holy Mother, and the Blessed Saints for their protection. Then Father Anselmo took the hyssop and sprinkled the edges with holy water.

"So far shalt thou come and no farther!" he said, and Bishop Sigurd answered, "Amen!"

The waters of the pond were still. The danger was past.

Grateful for their deliverance, the people knelt around its waters and thanked the White Christ and His Holy Mother.

Gunlaug had come out of the church with the rest and had witnessed the ceremonies. All her embarrassment had faded away. In the face of such wonderful manifestations, affairs of every-day life faded into nothingness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SOME ONE pointed across the meadow, towards the steep mountain at the west. She looked. Some one — it was Oyvind, was coming towards them at full speed. When he reached the edge of the pond he panted from his fast run and his face was covered with perspiration. His clothes were soiled and torn. He trembled in every limb.

He looked not to the right nor to the left. He walked right up to where Bishop Sigurd stood by the side of the man in the embroidered cloak. Here Oyvind knelt, humbly begging the man of God for his blessing. Bishop Sigurd talked kindly to him, urged him to seek forgiveness for his sins and concluded by praying for him. A little later Oyvind followed Father Anselmo to the confessional.

The service was partly over when he emerged and took his place beside Gunlaug while the little daughter, who received the name of Ingebjorg, from Thorold's grandmother, received baptism. His face was pale, but it reflected the new peace that lived in his soul. The dreadful thing which had changed the happy skald into the terrible creature he had become, had dropped from him like a worn-out garment.

But wonders had not ceased. The services were over, and friend sought friend to talk over the wondrous things that had come to pass. Again some one pointed towards the mountain on the west. From there came three human beings. One was a tall, queenly woman, leading a small boy by the hand. Behind her came a hunchback.

In spite of his newfound happiness, Oyvind's face turned white, his eyes dilated as in terror. Gunlaug saw and trembled. After all, even this was not to last. Even the White Christ could not help Oyvind. She grew sick from her disappointment.

It was the queen of the underearthlings, and with her were her son and Hans, the hunchback. There was something about her that reminded them of Oyvind. Like him she looked neither to the right nor to the left. Her eyes were fastened on the face of Bishop Sigurd, and before him she knelt, with her son and servant.

Again words of prayers and blessing fell from the bishop's lips. Again sinners went to the confessional.

When the queen returned, she, with the other two, knelt beside the limpid waters of the pond. Here they were baptized.

She rose happily to her feet and was about to address the bishop when her gaze was fastened upon him who wore the embroidered cloak. She walked towards him, her lips moving as in prayer. He opened his arms to her.

Oyvind knew this was the man Mokakala had taken into the mountain to be husband of the queen and the father to the second earthling to sit on his throne. How had this thing come to pass?

"You never came back to me," murmured the queen, who in baptism had received the name of Brynhild.

"It was impossible for me, dearest," he assured her. "As soon as I returned from the inside of the mountain I was carried into Dannemark, and there I have been till lately. Then I heard of the meadow having risen from the tjern, and I followed Bishop Sigurd, who is my friend, hither. Miracles had not ceased, then, I took on new hope and waited for my opportunity to come here again."

Again the bishop officiated. This time it was to solemnize the marriage which, having been consummated under the earth, needed the blessing of the Church. Since they were already husband and wife they dispensed with the bans, merely with the blessing of the bishop were they pronounced husband and wife.

While the others talked they stood apart.

"Is it not strange that we should at last stand under the sun?" she asked. "And, do you know? I have only one name for you. What besides Magnus do they call you?"

He smiled at her incoherence. "I so love my friends," he told her, "that I am called Magnus Vennesæl."

"It is a fine name," she returned. "Often in the long days that followed the one when you left me, I wished I knew by what name your friends, under the sun, called you. I never saw such happiness. I never expected such a day as this, Magnus."

"Oh, I tried to return, Brynhild, I hope you'll believe that," he said with painful earnestness.

"I believe all you tell me, dearest," she returned. "But I knew you who were baptized could never abide for the rest of your natural life within the mountain. You could not live among beings who were only lower animals in human form, and with a woman who, tho human, had no other humanizing influence than yours, in your talks to me of your God. Then you fired my soul with a desire to know more of Him and for a life in which I dared to worship the Power that made me."

Brynhild swept the crowd with her eyes and saw Oyvind, who had remained near and who had been a witness to all that had passed. His face was still pale and he was trembling. Brynhild's face turned hard and cold as she stood looking at him.

Gunlaug saw and wondered. How could Oyvind have displeased this strange woman who must have come from the inside of the mountain? For no one could descend the steep western cliff to where she first came to view.

The bishop, too, had observed Brynhild. He came up to where she stood.

"This man has today been to confession and

has received absolution," he said. "Surely, where God has forgiven, you, who are only human, should also forgive. We are all afflicted with the foibles that naturally cling to our clay."

So Brynhild went to Oyvind and gave him her hand.

"May the White Christ and His Virgin Mother be with you henceforth and keep you from all evil," she said fervently. "You are free now from the consequences of your great sin, but it is only thru the grace of divine Providence that this could be. It is only the true God who is able to annihilate an awful host such as held you in duress. Thank Him!"

Gunlaug approached them now.

"Won't you and your husband make our home yours for the night?" she begged. "The houses round about are filled with guests. I would that you come to us."

Oyvind now added his invitation, which was cordially accepted.

CHAPTER XXXIX

IT was late before Oyvind found the opportunity to ask Brynhild the questions that clamored for an answer. They were seated on the bench outside of Gunlaug's building, looking at the mountain, dimly silhouetted against the grey autumn twilight.

"How did you escape?" he asked first of all. "Did Mokakala open the passage thru the mountain?"

"We escaped by the passage left for him who was to bring the next queen of the underearthlings," she replied.

Oyvind shuddered. He knew what she meant.

Brynhild observed his agitation. "It is all over now," she told him. "Mokakala is dead!"

"Dead!" he echoed, "and — and —" He floundered about hopelessly.

"Do you mean Launa? She, too, is dead," she volunteered.

Again he trembled violently. "Launa — dead!" he muttered.

An expression of abhorrence leaped to her eyes. "You must have known she would die!" she cried with slight scorn. "Our God is extremely angry

when his most divine laws are disregarded. He tolerates no monstrosities. Launa, in compliance with these provisions, had to die, while you, by the divine grace of God, are still alive and with an opportunity to lead a clean life, to take your proper place in your community and in your home, as husband and father."

"Their power over us mortals is so terrible," he whimpered. "They are not fair, the dreadful creatures, they assume other people's faces and forms. They lead you where they list, and you have no power of resistance."

Again she lifted her scorn-filled eyes to him.

"Magnus came into the elf-people's realm," she said, "and they had no power over him. No more power, forsooth, than the stones beneath his feet. Think you not the elf-maidens tried their wiles on him? Yet he never yielded, never could have yielded to their sorcery. Would you know why?"

Oyvind nodded.

"He was innocent," she said.

He sat for a moment silent, his head bowed over his hands that twitched nervously as he held them tightly clenched between his knees.

"Has Launa been dead long?" he asked.

Brynhild shook her head. "Not long," she replied. "But long enough so she escaped the last dreadful scenes. They are all dead within the mountain."

"All dead?" echoed Oyvind terror-stricken.

"Yes. This morning, when Mokakala heard the church bells, he knew you had broken one promise and would break the others. He then determined to submerge the tjern and kill all those who were upon it. A stronger power asserted itself, however, and you should have heard him then! The mountain fairly rocked under his curses.

"There was only one dreadful thing left for him to do, and he did that. With one mighty jerk he dislodged the arrangements for controlling the mountain-fires. Now the fumes which for the last thousand years have been burned to give light and heat to the underearthlings escaped into the mountain and must before now have killed every living thing."

"And you, how did you manage your escape?" he asked breathlessly.

"Luck was with us. That very day Mokakala had planned to send Hans after you, no matter where he should find you, so he had the key to the mechanism that permits the great rock to swing. We had all we could do to get there and let the rock fall back before the gasses followed in enough quantity to make us unconscious."

"Then from the inner edge of the mountain?" he asked.

"We followed the little path thru the wall and gained the strip of water left along the mountain so you could return as you had promised. As soon as we gained the meadow we saw the procession. I knew from my husband's description that it was a

religious service. For the first time in my life I was genuinely happy. Now I should have the privilege of being baptized. Now I should be able to live under the sun. I should have the right to call upon my husband's God. It was wonderful!

"I was as a child who had been lost in the desert, and for weeks and months had called upon his parents in vain when they were not there to listen. I was like one who had sought blindly, futilely, and suddenly found them there, face to face with himself. Oh, I shall never be able to tell you. There are no words in my language to describe the desolation of a heart that dares not lift its voice to God — of the human being who dares not look to anything higher than those like his own, sordid self. Even you, who have felt the touch of the beast, you can have no conception of its meaning!"

"I understand something of it from the story I read in those haunted eyes," he returned. "I thought after Olaf brought the learning of the White Christ, that my pagan religion had been a mere drawback to me. I see now that, crude and inadequate as it is, it had the power of raising us immeasurably over what we should have been without it. I see, too, that, inadequate as it is, it is a faint echo of the pure God-religion that must have been taught to our forefathers in the dim past, perhaps in a far-away region, whence they came into the high North. No one has told me, but I see it now that I have come in contact with those who were godless. I see that it has made

our people much bigger and better than they otherwise would have been."

"I think you have the right idea," she said. "But even now you don't understand, and I can not explain. It is as if some one who had always been blind should try to explain to one not so afflicted the sufferings of those who can not see. In the upper world, no matter where you go, you find people having something higher than themselves to love, to worship, something that leads them upward, away from themselves. In the nether world it is not so. There they are away from the God-influence. There they are away from the listening ear, forbidden, at that, to worship, forbidden to pray, forbidden to hope.

"Human intellect can not grasp the terror in this position. They are away from the influence that creates the difference between the beast and the human being, from the influence that creates the difference between heaven and perdition."

At nightfall Oyvind disappeared. In the darkness and bitterness of her soul, darker than ever after the momentary glimpse of light, Gunlaug wept thru the night. As she was passing in and out she had caught snatches of the conversation between her husband and Brynhild. She had not understood much, but she had caught the significance of what they said about Launa. Oyvind had done the elf-woman a wrong, so great that had Brynhild not been a Chris-

tian she would have hated him with a hot, scornful hatred.

In the early morning he returned. In the bright sunshine he stood before her, smiling. Her heart gave a sudden, joyful bounce. It was the old, boyish smile, the rougish up-cutting of the lips she had so loved.

He said not a word, but took her by the hand and silently led her to the foot of the cliff, from where they climbed up and sat on their ledge. He still retained her hand while they sat, she with her eyes on his face, he smilingly looking down at the wold below.

For the first time he felt real pleasure in his possessions, in the wide fields, in the splendid flocks, grazing on the tender aftermath, and in the cozy circle of houses that constituted their home.

Then he raised his eyes to hers. "I must talk freely with you," he said. "The White Christ and the great God have forgiven me, now I must ask your forgiveness for all the suffering I have brought to you, dearest."

"You needn't think you must wait for your pardon til you have told your story," she said gently. "I have forgiven always."

It was then that he told her about his visit among the underearthlings, about Mokakala and the earthling queen with her child and servant. But not once did he mention Launa. Was there still to be a secret chamber in his heart?

"And so," he concluded, "my sin lay in making three promises. First, that I should never permit a church-bell to ring on the meadow; second, that I would not allow my first daughter to be baptized; and third, that when she was a year old I would bring her into the mountain, to the queen of the underearthlings."

"How could you make such a promise, Oyvind?" she asked.

"It all seemed so remote, so unreal. Who could imagine there would ever be occasion to ring a church-bell on the meadow? As for the other, I did not expect ever to see you, the advent of a daughter seemed wholly unreal."

"And what did they want of my baby?" she asked, shuddering.

"I told you about the curse. It was to be lifted only when, in succession, three earthlings had sat on Mokakala's throne. It was planned that our daughter should mate with Brynhild's son and their child should be the third earthling ruler. Then the curse would be taken away. The underearthlings would thenceforth be permitted to live under the sun, they'd have a soul, a God."

"But perhaps it would have been right for us to give our child. If Jehovah wanted it, why shouldn't we? He was their Jehovah, our God."

"No," he returned, "according to promise, they might have those who otherwise would lose their lives in the tjern. Our daughter is not one of those.

Mokakala was disobedient. Therefore he was at last destroyed, he and all his people."

"That, then, was what made you so unhappy?" she asked.

He nodded. "It was terrible, that promise. It stood before me in letters of fire! You can well understand why I had such fear when you told me a child was under way."

"But why did you stay away all summer?" she asked.

"Don't you understand, dearest, that I tried to make it so lonely for you that you'd take the little ones and come to me. I was prepared to endure anything if it would only bring you away from that dreadful meadow."

"Then why did you not tell me?" she asked in surprise.

"Don't you see, dearest, I couldn't," he returned. "Don't you see that with the first word I should be breaking my promise. Then destruction would be quick and sure. Don't you remember yesterday? That was what I feared. And I could do nothing. I was in their power. I know now that nothing except the White Christ can overcome such spirits of darkness as those who lived within the mountain."

He paused and sat for a while gazing over the wold beneath them. This was all, then. He did not mean to speak of the real thing that had made

trouble between them. He was not going to speak about Launa. She moved her lips in silent prayer, calling upon the true God for guidance.

"Is that all, then, Oyvind? Had you no further experiences in the heart of the mountain?" she asked almost in a whisper.

He hunched forward into the old, dejected attitude she remembered so well, his eyes still on the scene below them, but he said nothing.

"It was not because of your promises that you made those long and frequent visits into the mountain, Oyvind."

"You have reason for what you say, Gunlaug," he replied slowly, "but the rest is of such a painful nature that I hate to speak."

"But now that we have this heart-to-heart talk, is it not better that we have it all understood? Then we can bury it, you know," she said gently. "Don't you think you'll feel happier if you talk it over with me, Oyvind?"

"Perhaps you are right, perhaps I should tell you about Launa," he returned in a low voice.

"As you may know, she was an elf-maiden and, like the others, she desired to capture a spark of a human soul that would live after her body should have passed into corruption. They fear no pain, no punishment that might be destined to prevent their attempt to subdue an earthling. They fear nothing except the absolute annihilation which attends their demise. Burning at the stake would not dissuade

them in their attempt to throw their fire-iron over an earthling and, in his weakness, conquer him."

"Is that the way a man becomes mountain-taken?" Gunlaug asked with white lips. "And you, were you mountain-taken?"

He shook his head. "In all but one part," he replied. "Launa never threw her fire-iron over me."

"But your terror? Your uncanny visits to the mountain?" she persisted.

He sat silent for a moment. Then he dropped her hand and folded his arms across his breast.

"I came to a great extent under Launa's influence," he said slowly. "She controlled me utterly under the full moon."

"But Launa died," she whispered.

"Yes," he returned. "She died. It removed the curse from me."

"But why should she? I heard Brynhild speak to you of it. I think I understand its hidden meaning."

He rose to his feet, lifted her up and stood facing her.

"Yes, it has a hidden meaning, a dreadful meaning, but why should we now speak of that? Now we understand each other fully, let us bury it all from our sight! The White Christ and the great God have forgiven me. You said but now you had forgiven me always.

"As you see, it is all away. As the disease which has been cured it is gone, and it leaves no conta-

gion. Brush away all those cobwebs of suspicion that must have formed within your range of vision, and try to see in me a new man, cleansed. Come out of your dreadful suffering, Gunlaug. Forgive me! Come to me!"

Gunlaug saw the wisdom of his speech. With a happy laugh she went to him, and her husband's caresses removed the painful memories, as when the housewife's brush removes the tangled web of the spider from some unused corner, making it sweet and clean. With her head against her husband's breast she bade farewell to all her suspicions and all her fears, which she never permitted to return with their phantoms of ugliness.

They walked back, hand in hand, like happy children. There was so much to do, to plan, to live after those years of suffering. They must catch up with the music and laughter, with the singing and dancing, with the little ones. Ah, the little ones! It seemed to them that in their new-found happiness they had just then become husband and wife, just then become parents.

That night Oyvind mended his harp. When Gunlaug was preparing her little ones for bed she heard the loved tones, and tears of gladness rolled down her cheeks. Her dreams, at last, had come true!

And so it came to pass that the place which so long had been shunned by the young and happy, became the meeting-place for all. Here was feasting as of yore, and without the blessing of the remem-

brance-cups. There were dancing and singing, the music of the harp, light, laughter, and gladness. There were happy conversation and children's prattle. Thorold and Guthorm met there in many a cozy hour of reminiscence.

During the long winter evenings, while the great logs blazed on the hearth, Oyvind's harp was rarely silent. He and Gunlaug loved friends and sociability. Nobly were they making up for the sad, silent years.

CHAPTER XL

SINCE then centuries have rolled away. Almost a thousand years have passed into ages that were. They may have been long or they may have been short. That depends upon how they have been lived. Still do the pagan gods live, they require so little of us, the pagan gods. The evil lives, too, the evil as exemplified in the lives of the underearthlings. But the conquest of the White Christ still continues. Over and above, and thru the entire structural life of the people, lives the Spirit of the White Christ. He who in the days of Olaf came into the lives of the Vikings, is still there.

In that same, narrow valley, too, live the descendants of Oyvind and Gunlaug. They were a sturdy pair. Mokakala chose well. If you are a tourist and fond of seeking uncommon places, uncommon life-histories, perhaps you'll find their people. They will tell you of Oyvind's visit to the underearthlings and its dreadful consequences. They will show you the meadow with its church, standing on the very site of Olaf's structure, the church built by the Vikings and dedicated by Bishop Sigurd. They will point to the black, sullen pond, an ever present wit-

ness to the power of the White Christ over the spirits of darkness.

They will lead you across the meadow, all dotted with cats-paw, tar-blossom, daisies, and the pretty, golden key-flower, to the narrow strip of water hugging the mountain. It still lies there, black and sullen, as if it were waiting for a day when the tjern shall break its shackles and once more occupy the mountain-bowl that now holds the fertile meadow. They will point out to you the narrow path along its sides, leading into the mountain, along which Brynhild and Hans and the little mountain-born earthling made their escape.

Perhaps you'll spend a night on the meadow, lying close to the water when the moon is round and full. Then you will hear sobbing as if some one grieved endlessly, as over something which had been lost for centuries and would remain lost for other centuries to come.

When the big sun comes peeping over the high mountain, you'll tell your friends that it was the wind soughing thru the pines on the mountain side. But alone, under the full moon, your ideas were different. You knew then that the tiny spark of a living soul — that which Launa stole from Oyvind — is there, waiting, waiting to grow. Perhaps it will grow into something that is to find happiness, perhaps not. Who knows? It is there, the spark lives, grows; neglected, perhaps, for the time being, but in time it must come to its own.

You may be wrong entirely. Perhaps Launa grieves that, Prometheus-like, she tried to filch that which the Master had not meant for her. Perhaps, forsooth, she thinks a thousand years of a dim, inadequate existence, with other such periods to come, is too big a price to pay for a mere glimmer of love, light, and happiness that but for her forefathers' sin should, in full measure, have been hers for aeons of time.

You may regard this story a figment from a dream of an addled brain, or you may think these things were. It should open your heart and eyes to the privileges that are yours. Perhaps your thoughts have soared among the clouds, perhaps you have kept the garments of your soul spotless. Perhaps you have saturated them in the gutter. Perhaps your soul is but a tiny, flickering spark. Who knows but yourself?

But you are not in the position of the underearthlings. You have the privilege of addressing the Supreme Power that made you. You are worth as much as a man as you would be as an angel. But you must accept the help which alone can elevate you above your brute-self. You must accept that which leads you onward and upward, or live in danger of becoming a soulless beast, a slimy serpent.

Had you none to whom you could go in prayer, your life would be one of hopelessness and despair, like Launa's. Those with whom you come in

contact would be polluted as was Oyvind. Whether or not you possess faith in the true God, something bigger than your puny self, makes the difference between the human and the soulless. It makes the difference that exists between heaven and perdition.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

00022828319